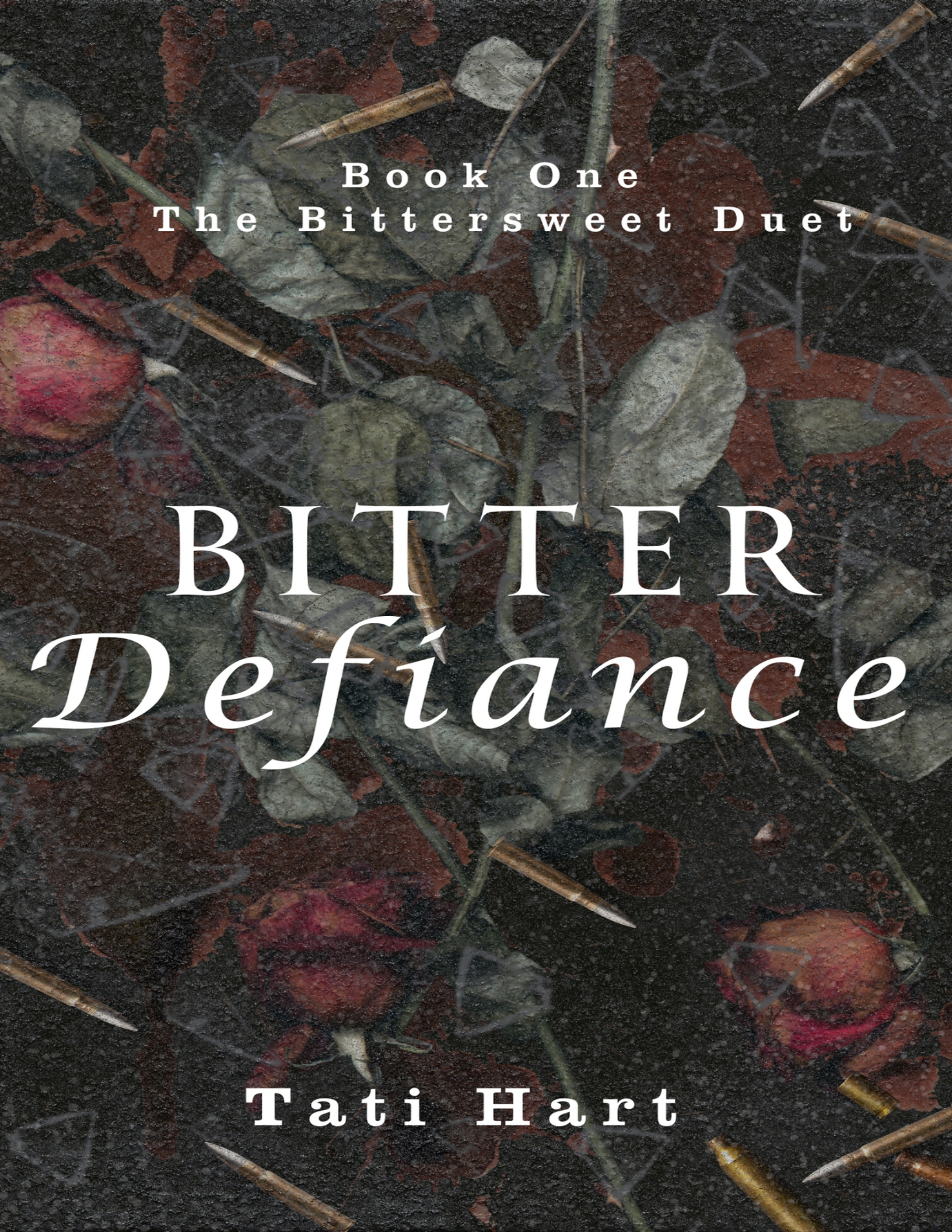
Book One
The Bittersweet Duet
BITTER
Defiance
Tati Hart

Bitter Defiance

The Bittersweet Duet

Tati Hart

OceanofPDF.com

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Blurb

She was always supposed to be mine. Her “love” for another man never once changed that fate.

I have her on my arm, and she's the closest thing to a vision I've ever needed. My angel. The one who haunts every hour I'm awake, and most of the ones I'm not.

She's mine. Completely. Irrevocably. Whether she's decided to accept that yet or not.

A tear slides down her cheek as she watches the ceremony, and even her tears manage to be beautiful. I take no satisfaction in them—it just seems to be the only thing I trigger in her these days.

"The tears you shed for another man break me, my love."

Amara doesn't look at me. Her eyes are fixed on the bride—the woman I bought to marry the man *she* was supposed to end up with.

"I'd burn the world down for you," I tell her. "I've done unforgivable things just to keep you mine, and I'd do them again. What does he have that I don't?"

She laughs, bitter, twisting the ring I forced back onto her finger this morning. "Freedom. A life that isn't soaked in blood."

"I can't give you that," I admit. "But you'll learn to love me enough that it stops mattering. No one will ever love you the way I do."

She nods, distracted. And something in that nod unsettles me. The defiance she's thrown in my face for three years is nowhere in it.

Have I finally broken her?

Book One of the Bittersweet Duet. A dark mafia romance that ends on a cliffhanger.

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Hi, love.

Before you dive in—a few things I want to say to you first.

Bitter Defiance is Book One in a duet, and it ends on a cliffhanger. Amara and Matteo's story finishes in Book Two, *Sweet Surrender*.

This is a dark romance. It contains morally gray characters, power imbalances, violence, and situations that won't sit easily with every reader. However, all characters involved in any romantic or sexual relationship are adults, over eighteen, with no blood relation to one another. And I'll say this plainly because it matters to me: nothing in these pages is meant to be glorified or romanticized.

What I will promise you: Amara does not make it easy for this obsessed man. She fights him, resents him, and defies him at every single turn in this book. And Matteo is, quite frankly, a pathetic yearner for a woman who wants absolutely nothing to do with him.

If this sounds like your kind of dark fun—welcome. I'm so glad you're here.

With love (and a little chaos),

Tati Hart

OceanofPDF.com

To everyone who's ever wanted to be ruined a little.

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Chapter One

Amara

Blood takes four showers to come off. I know because I've counted.

Last night my father shot a traitor at the dinner table. I got soaked—and the carbonara Lydia spent all day making because it's my favorite, too. She stood in the doorway after, watching me wipe sauce and blood off my chin. It seems that she has gotten used to it better than I have, more concerned about the table she just cleaned than the dead man in the kitchen.

That's how it works in my world. Everything you love gets tainted eventually, and if it happens slowly enough, you stop noticing the exact day it turned. You just wake up one morning and realize you can't remember what your favorite meal tasted like without the flavor of copper sitting under your tongue.

I still taste it now, hours later. My sneakers crunch on the gravel, and I focus on that instead—crunch, crunch, crunch—until I'm doing stupid little skipping steps.

The studio is the one place that is my refuge. Girls-only. No men past the front desk, ever, not even for deliveries. Half the women here have a horrifying story. Dancers with anorexic bodies because directors told them that’s the only way to land a gig. Wives who show up in long sleeves in July. Nobody asks. We just dance to forget, and then we go back out into whatever's waiting for us.

I hated it at first. I wanted to be good enough to leave—a contract, an income, my name on a poster instead of stapled to my father's.

Then Matteo Russo decided my life was his.

I can't even call him my father's associate. That word implies they're close to equal, and they are not, not even a little. My father runs card tables and a few "clean" casinos that aren't clean at all. Matteo runs the ports—every port on this side of the hemisphere. Nothing moves without going through him first. Guns, product, cash, people, favors, bodies. Everyone bends for him. The Bratva bends for him. The Cosa Nostra bends for him.

Men who don't bend for anyone alive bend for him, and do it fast, and do it quietly.

And my father can't tell him no. Nobody can.

Except, apparently, that doesn't stop him from caring what I do with my Tuesday nights. It doesn't stop him from caring what I wear or who I sit next to at tables. I used to go insane wondering why. Three years later, I've stopped looking for the reason.

I remember when I'd booked my first real show and I ran home to tell my father like it was Christmas morning. Matteo was sitting in his study; he'd known before I did.

"No," he said.

I looked at my father, begging him with my eyes to override it. He looked at the floor.

But I went anyway. Because my father can't tell Matteo no, but I can.

I danced to an empty theater that day. Every seat empty except one, center row, where Matteo sat clapping slowly. I never booked another show after that.

Three years. Three years of him deciding what I wear, where I go, who gets to be in my space. It's like I'm a dog he has on a leash. All I crave is freedom.

A hand lands on my shoulder, and I spin fast enough to hurt my neck before I recognize the face, and my whole body relaxes in a rush that almost embarrasses me.

Adrien.

I met him at a medical checkup three months ago. We've been official for exactly a month. He has a calm aura, like nothing bad has ever happened to him, and when he smiles, I forget for a second that I come from the gutter.

"Hey, you." He grins, holding out an apple. "Surgery went great. They actually let me close."

We sit on the grass, dampness soaking through my jeans, and split apples while he talks about sutures and the surgeon who almost let him hold a retractor. This is the only hour of my week where I'm not a mob boss's daughter or somebody's obsession.

"You know," he says, wiping juice off his chin with the back of his hand, "once I'm done with residency, I want to take you somewhere fancy. You deserve better than a park bench and produce."

"I don't want any of that. I'm happy just like this."

He shakes his head.

"I mean it," I say. "I've had fancy. None of it—" I gulp, trying to find a way to get my point across. "I just want boring. I want to argue about whose turn it is to do the dishes. I want to spend my weekends watching Netflix. And I want a small home—maybe a one-bedroom apartment in a safe neighborhood."

"That's it? That's the dream?"

"That's the whole dream." I laugh.

He reaches over and tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. "Then that's what I'll give you. I promise."

I want to believe a promise like that can survive my world.

He kisses my cheek and goes back to flipping through his exam notes with my head on his shoulder.

I don't tell him what I'm actually thinking, which is: I've made him a target just by wanting him.

If Matteo ever finds out about this—about him—I don't think either of us survives finding out exactly how far a man like that will go to keep something he considers his.

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Chapter Two

Matteo

Three years ago, I got stabbed and called it the best night of my life.

It started with a rat. A distributor I'd trusted with a shipment lane decided he could skim from my port and resell at half price. I found him in an alley two blocks from the docks, and I was going to take both his hands before I put a bullet in him.

He got in three good hits with a knife before I put him down for good, and by the time he took his last breath, I was bleeding more than I wanted to admit to Lorenzo over the radio. So I did what any rational man does. I crawled behind a dumpster and waited to either bleed out or get picked up, whichever came first.

That's when I saw her.

Through a lit window across the street, in a room full of mirrors, dancing like a little bird.

I've owned a lot of things. Buildings, ports, men. Nothing ever came close to her. I remember thinking, with drunk-on-blood-loss clarity: if I die right here, this is an acceptable last image. Better than acceptable. I'd take it over Heaven, if Heaven existed, which it doesn't, not for men like me.

My team hauled me into a van four minutes later. I fought them the entire way, trying to get back to that window. They thought I was in shock.

Women are a liability in this business. Everyone in my world learns that lesson early, or they don't survive long enough to learn a second one. You marry for territory, you fuck for stress relief, and you never, under any circumstance, let a woman become a variable you can't control.

I held out one week before I had a name. Amara White. Twenty years old at the time, some low-tier bookie's daughter. A week. I'm not proud of that number, but a man finds his purpose eventually. I found mine bleeding out in an alley.

Her father has a gambling habit deep enough to swallow three businesses, and I've spent three fucking years pulling him out of holes he

keeps digging directly under his daughter's feet. I couldn't care less if they buried him tomorrow. I do it because every debt he owes is a leash I get to hold, and every leash leads back to her. My Amara.

Dresses. Cars. Jewelry. There's nothing I haven't bought her. She's never once said thank you. Or looked at me with love.

I pour two fingers of scotch and drink it like water, then pour again. I do this most nights now. It's the only thing that keeps me in this chair instead of in her bedroom, because if I go to her tonight, I won't leave, and I won't be gentle. My Amara deserves her first time to be gentle.

She thinks I'm the thing she needs saving from. She still hasn't figured out I'm the only reason she's even still alive. That's fine. Hate keeps her thinking about me. Indifference would've killed me faster.

A knock lands on my door. It must be Lorenzo.

"Come in," I say, and my voice comes out lower than I mean it to, scraped raw from the liquor.

He doesn't sit. Lorenzo's been with me eleven years, and he only does that when he knows I'm going to go crazy at the news he brings me.

"We have a situation, sir."

My jaw tightens.

He sets an envelope on the desk, and I rip it open.

My men take photographs from three streets back without her ever knowing she's being watched.

The problem is the man's mouth on her cheek in the second photo.

The problem is the third photo: an apple between them, her leaning into him.

I have met every person who has ever spoken to Amara for longer than a transaction. Teachers. Dance instructors. The barista who spells her name wrong. I catalog them. I decide, individually, whether they live comfortable lives or short ones. This man is new. A month of dating, apparently, which means my surveillance missed a window, which means someone on my payroll is about to have a very bad month.

A doctor. Resident, according to the file Lorenzo's already compiled and set beside the photos. Twenty-six. No criminal record. Genuinely, boringly clean, which is the single most offensive thing I've read. She chose *this* over me?

I'm the one who's been controlling her life for years. I sabotaged her auditions, made sure every stage she ever stood on stayed empty except for

me—I was sparing her the monster I'd become if I saw her in rooms full of men who'd look at her dancing the way I do.

Apparently, my control was lacking.

I set the photos down.

"Sir?" Lorenzo says when I don't speak for too long.

"Where is she right now?"

"The studio. Then home."

"And him?"

"Hospital. Night shift starts at seven."

I check my watch. Six-forty.

Plenty of time.

I'm not going to kill him. That would guarantee that Amara would hate me, and I can't have that. I want her love. Either way, dead men make for very poor lessons—they can't remember, and I need this one to remember. I want him walking past that studio in a year with a limp, flinching at car doors, unable to explain to anyone why he never went back to finish his residency in this city. I want Amara to see it, too. I want her to understand, in the marrow of her, that there is no normal life waiting for her outside me.

She'll fight me on this. She'll cuss me out, and a part of me will enjoy every second of it, because at least when she's screaming at me, she's looking at me.

I've waited for her to choose this. To choose *me*.

But she's out of time to do it on her own.

"Pull the surveillance on the doctor," I say, standing and buttoning my jacket. "And get my car."

I can't live with the idea of losing her to a man who thinks an apple and a park bench are worthy of her.

It isn't.

Nothing is enough, except *me*.

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Chapter Three

Amara

I feel it before I'm even fully awake. *Eyes*.

It's not the first time I've felt watched. With Matteo circling my life, I doubt it'll be the last. But this morning it's worse. Anxiety has a flavor—sour candy dissolving too fast, coating the back of my throat—and it floods my mouth before my brain even catches up to why.

Does he know about Adrien?

I sit up too fast, and my body curls into itself on instinct, knees to chest. *Breathe, Amara. Everything's fine.*

I know it's a lie the second I think it. But lies are useful when they stop you from having a panic attack.

By the time I've talked myself down, I force myself to get up and get dressed. I wear a loose sundress with a cutout at the side. I've always liked it because it's the only piece of clothing in this house that feels like it belongs to me and not to someone else. I've had it four years. It hangs in a closet stuffed with things worth more than most people's rent—silk, diamonds, and designer names—all of it from Matteo, none of it ever worn.

It feels like the second I put one of his gifts on my body, I'm telling him I understand his terms. And I don't.

I want out. I want freedom.

Which is why I want Adrien. Not as an escape plan—I'd hate myself if that's all this was—but because when I picture five years from now, it's his voice in the kitchen, not gunfire down the hall. It's him telling me about some idiot attending who scrubbed in wrong while I burn garlic in a pan that isn't going to end up splattered with blood. It's sleeping without having to worry that a person I love has been shot and is bleeding out in some alleyway. It's money that doesn't smell like filth.

That's the whole want. It's embarrassingly small.

I spray the perfume Adrien got me—just a drugstore bottle he probably bought with whatever was left after his student debt ate everything else—

and I go light on it. I don't want to run out of it.

It might be the cheapest gift I own. It's also the only one that means anything to me.

Downstairs, I already know what's waiting. Matteo comes by most mornings now to inspect me like I'm livestock he's thinking of buying. I'm twenty-three. I'm too grown to have a keeper.

I pass through the kitchen on my way down, and Lydia looks up from the stove, wiping her hands on the dish towel slung over her shoulder.

"There she is. My pretty girl." She cups my face for a second. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, did you?"

She turns back to the stove. "I did not. My nephew FaceTimed me until midnight showing me some game on his tablet. I'm sixty-one years old; by midnight I should be knocked out."

"You're not that old."

"I am old. My knees are old. My patience is old." She waves the wooden spoon at me. "But he's my nephew, so I still answered. That's how you know you're done for."

Her nephews are the cutest.

"Go on." She shoos me toward the door with the same spoon. "Go be miserable at your obsessed man so I can finish this in peace."

"He's not my—"

"Mm-hm." She's already turned away, back to whatever she's cooking.

Moving along, he's exactly where I expect—sprawled across our lounge chair, sleeves rolled to show forearms mapped in ink, muscle stacked on muscle like he has time for a gym between running a criminal shipping empire and ruining my mornings. I give my father a quick kiss on the cheek and aim myself at the door.

"Good morning, Mr. Russo," I say, already turning.

"Three years, Amara." His voice doesn't rise. "I think we're past 'Mr. Russo.'"

My father's eyes drop to his own shoes. I hate watching that. I remember him being a big man once. Now he shrinks in his own dining room in front of a man in a button-up.

But I don't have my father's survival instincts.

"I think Mr. Russo is more appropriate," I say. "You're his business partner. I'm sure that comes with a certain respect."

The look my father shoots me could strip paint. Matteo just hums, almost amused, rolling his sleeve another inch.

He starts plating breakfast from the spread Lydia sets out for him every single morning on my father's orders, and I already know how this goes. He builds a plate. He slides it toward the empty chair beside him. And he hand-feeds me.

"If you'll excuse me," I try. "I'm running late."

"Sit."

"I already ate," I try again.

"Sit down, Amara." His eyes cut to me. "Eat."

I bite the inside of my cheek instead of saying what I want to say because I know exactly how much my father needs whatever deal is riding on this man's good mood, and I am, apparently, part of the collateral. So I sit. In the chair he pulled out. Angled toward him like a good pet.

I hate myself a little every time I do this.

"Why me?" I ask, low enough for only him to hear. "You could have anyone. Women who'd fall over themselves for a man like you. Why waste your morning babysitting me?"

"Careful," he hisses. "I don't like you comparing yourself to other women. If you want compliments, don't fish them out of me. I'd gladly give them to you. There's no need for this."

"I'm not fishing for anything from you."

"You are. You just don't recognize it as fishing because it's dressed as an insult."

He leans in close enough that I feel the heat coming off him and the expensive smell of whatever he wears—and inhales. My father's business talk stutters for a second before picking back up like nothing's happening.

Matteo's face changes. Something tightens around his mouth.

"You changed your perfume."

My stomach drops through the floor. There is no reason a man like this should notice a change in my perfume under everything else in this room—cologne, gunpowder residue that probably never fully leaves his coats, breakfast. And yet.

"I did," I confess.

"I don't like it." His eyes hold mine, searching. I'm scared he can see straight through my skin to Adrien's name written somewhere underneath it.

I look away first.

"Too bad," I say, not able to stop myself. "Thank you for breakfast, Mr. Russo."

I don't look back at either of them on my way out, my heart going too fast, my mouth still sour.

I already know what I'll come home to.

And I'm right. The bottle is on my bathroom floor by evening, shattered into pieces.

I get down on my knees anyway and press what's left of it into my wrists and collarbones. Just to prove, to myself if to no one else, that he doesn't get to win that easily.

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Chapter Four

Amara

"Hi, beautiful girl!" Adrien beams the second he spots me, and happiness fills me before I've even reached him.

I wave both arms over my head like an idiot, laughing at how easy it is to be myself around him. My feet skip across the damp grass, and I stop close enough to press a kiss against the stubble on his jaw.

"I missed you," I say, and mean it more than I probably should this early into whatever we are.

He wraps me up in a hug, and I melt into it. This is all I want. Not diamonds or luxury cars, and definitely not a man who thinks of me as a possession.

With Adrien, I get to imagine a future that isn't the color of gray suits, black cars following me everywhere, and bloodshed.

He's set up a picnic, and it's the simplicity that I've always wanted. I scrunch my nose at the damp seeping through my shorts, peel off my jacket, and sit on it instead, then look back up at him with a smile I can feel stretching all the way to my ears.

"Chicken sandwiches," he says, pulling containers out of a basket. "Fruit. Chocolate. I know it's not fancy—"

"Adrien." I cut him off. "It's perfect."

I hate chicken, actually. I eat it anyway, and like it's the best thing I've had all year, because a man juggling exams, hospital shifts, and whatever's left of his sanity took the time to pack a basket for me.

"How's your mom?" I ask quietly, biting into a strawberry to chase the taste of chicken off my tongue.

His shoulders drop.

His great-grandmother died of breast cancer. His grandmother, the same. His mother tested positive for the gene years ago, and Adrien picked

medicine specifically so he'd be finished, licensed, and useful before it ever became her reality. He wanted to beat the clock.

He didn't beat it.

He swallows hard, taking a pull from his water bottle. "It's aggressive. We're having trouble covering the treatment."

Sadness pours into my veins. From everything he's told me, his mother is the kind of woman who apologizes to nurses for being a bother while she's getting chemo. Good people get sick and die slowly. The scum of the earth live long, obscene lives full of luxury.

"How many sessions does she have left?" I ask, wiping at the corner of my eye.

"We don't know. We're just hoping the tumors keep responding." He picks at the lettuce in front of him. "I was thinking about picking up a second job—"

"How? You're already running on four hours of sleep."

He shrugs instead of answering.

Our situation isn't what it used to be either, not since my father started feeding his gambling habit like it was a second child. But even shrunk down, even filthy with where it comes from, our money is still more than most people get to touch.

I reach up and unclasp the diamond pendant around my neck—one of the birthday gifts from back when my father's luck hadn't fully turned.

Adrien's given me so much—normal mornings, normal fights, the simple fact of feeling human instead of ornamental.

I hold it out. He shakes his head immediately.

"I can't take that, Amara."

I lean in and kiss the corner of his mouth. "If you care about me, you'll let me help."

"It's too much."

"It isn't. Why won't you let me do this if I can?"

His eyes go glassy, and he finally takes it from my palm. "I'll pay you back."

I brush a piece of hair off his forehead. "You already have."

"Thank you," he says, his voice cracking. "Thank you."

"Thank you, too." I mean it—thank you for a version of me that gets to want small things and have them.

I hook my pinky around his. "Through thick and thin?"

"Through thick and thin," he says.

I wish and pray that we'll both be able to keep that promise.

But what if he finds out what's behind closed doors? The filth I come from? Would he stay?

I don't let myself look at the black car I noticed idling two streets back, its windows tinted dark enough that I couldn't tell if anyone was inside or if I imagined it entirely.

I focus on Adrien's hand in mine instead.

A few hours of peace.

That's all I ask for these days. The only thing Matteo hasn't figured out how to take from me yet.

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Chapter Five

Amara

I know something's wrong the second I step through the door.

Because it's nine on a Friday, and my father isn't at the casino losing money. He's home. Sitting in the lounge chair with a whiskey bottle.

I cross the room slowly. I feel like the floor might give out if I move too fast.

"Father. What's wrong?"

He tips the bottle back—vodka now, not whiskey, whatever was closest—and it comes back up half a second later, spluttering down his chin, out his nose, and he coughs so hard his whole body folds around it.

My legs stop holding me up on their own. I find myself kneeling.

"Please. Please tell me what happened." My voice cracks.

A single tear runs down the side of his face. I have never once in twenty-three years watched my father cry. Not when we lost the first casino, or even when the FBI searched our house for six hours straight. Whatever this is, it's worse than anything that's ever happened to us, and I haven't even heard it yet.

"We'll figure it out," I say, my words tripping over each other. "I'll get a job. Three jobs. I don't care, we'll—"

"Enough." He screams loud enough that I flinch backward off my knees and land hard on the floor.

My father does not scream at me. He never has. Whatever's coming next, it's already rewritten the rules of who we are to each other.

"Come here." He pats the cushion beside him, and I climb up on shaking legs and sit close enough to smell the alcohol coming off him in waves.

The silence after that stretches long enough that I start picking the polish off my thumbnail. I'm certain that whatever's on the other side of his mouth opening again is going to be worse than the wait.

I was wrong about that, too. I braced for a raid. Debt collectors. The FBI. I could have survived any of that.

"I'm sorry, little girl." He drinks again, straight from the bottle, and half of it comes back up onto his shirt, onto my arm. I wipe it off along with the tears already on my face. "I failed you. Forgive me."

"What did you do?" My whole body's gone cold—ice under my skin while my head runs hot enough to make me nauseous.

"You know Russo's been pulling me out of debt." He grimaces. "Out of the... predicaments."

Predicaments.

My father built this empire out of nothing. Casinos, legal and illegal, an entire underworld foothold, with no family behind him. He's smart. He's always been smart.

Why did he allow himself to ruin it all? I bite the question back, because I still live under his roof, still eat food he pays for, and a daughter doesn't get to interrogate the man keeping the lights on.

"I never asked why he kept doing it." My father sets the bottle down, and his hand is shaking badly enough that it clinks against the side table twice before it settles. "Maybe that was stupid of me."

My heart's slamming so hard I can feel it in my throat, in my ears, everywhere but where it's supposed to be.

"He wants you. My little girl. I'm so sorry."

Everything in me stops at once.

"W-what?"

"I'm sorry," he says again.

I laugh like a maniac. "Why are you sorry? I'm not furniture. I'm not something you trade between properties. We say no. That's it. That's the whole sentence, Father, we say no—"

He puts his head in his hands and doesn't answer, which is its own answer.

"Don't do this to me," I beg. "I'd rather we lose everything. You built this fortune, it didn't build you. We can start over, please—"

"It's your hand in marriage," he says, saying it fast like ripping off a bandage. "Or he pulls his hand out of the predicaments. And that means my head on a spike, Amara."

Married to Matteo Russo.

My nightmare.

Every plan I ever had goes up in flames. Gone before I even get to mourn it.

I don't remember the next few minutes clearly. There's a black hole where my body kept moving without my permission, and I come back to myself mid-scream, Lydia's hand trying to slap me awake, my father in front of me holding out a glass of water with an olive-branch expression that doesn't match the four red lines scored down the side of his face.

I did that.

I hit my own father, and I don't remember any of it, and the guilt and the fury tangle together in my chest. I turn away from the water. I'm not ready to accept his subtle apology. And I'm not ready to forgive myself for resorting to violence either.

I made a promise years back that I'd never end up like that. But here I am.

I get up on legs that don't feel like mine. Lydia's saying something, but it comes through like I'm underwater, and the room tips sideways before I go down again.

My father's addiction handed me over to the devil, wrapped in a bow, to a man who's spent three years proving there's no version of "no" that applies to him.

And neither of us gets the luxury of saying it anyway.

I feel Lydia come lie down next to me, playing with my hair until I fall asleep.

"It's going to be okay," she lies to me.

"I hope," I whisper.

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Chapter Six

Amara

My whole world ended.

That's the closest I can get to explaining it. Every dream I've ever let myself have collapsed before I even got brave enough to look at it head-on. I didn't even get the chance to fall in love with Adrien properly—just a crush and a pinky promise that was supposed to mean forever and now has an expiration date.

I'll never dance professionally. I'll never get the version of my life that's calm and happy.

I know what the women in our circle would say if they heard me complaining. Matteo Russo isn't just wealthy and handsome—he has absolute control over the mafia world, and there are women who would trade a limb to be exactly where I am right now.

But I don't want an inch of him. I don't want any part of this.

I text Adrien to meet at our bench, and I sit there working my thumbnail raw while I wait. He's late. He's always a little late because of his schedule. But it will pay off eventually.

Except "eventually" isn't going to have me anymore. It's going to be some other woman sitting across from him in five years, getting the boring Tuesday I wanted, while I get a husband whose hands have killed more people than I've had birthdays.

It starts raining, and it feels almost considerate, like the sky agreed with the inside of my chest. Everything in me has gone the color of the clouds. I hold my hand out past the tree line and let the cold hit my palm. The shock of it cuts through the fire sitting low in my stomach.

Everything burns. My throat, my eyes, the skin on the back of my neck where I can still feel Matteo's breath from this morning.

I get up and walk straight out from under the trees into the open rain, and in under a minute I'm soaked through completely. I laugh. I spin, arms

out, water running off my elbows, glad there's nobody around to see me losing my mind.

I have lost it. I actually have.

I laugh until I don't know when it turned into sobbing, both sounds coming from the same place in my chest.

When Adrien comes into view down the path, I tilt my face up to the sky and let it wash away my tears. I'm going to take every single minute I have left of this—of him, of normal—before I become the devil's wife.

He hesitates at the edge of the rain, jacket held over his head, then gives up and throws it onto the bench, scowling as the water soaks him.

"I'm sorry," he says, out of breath, his hand rubbing the back of his neck. "Got stuck talking to someone at the coffee place. I didn't mean to—"

I grab both his hands. "It's fine. You're here."

He grins at me, his blond hair plastered flat in some places and sticking straight up in others, and I laugh, trying to smooth it down.

"Have you been crying?" His eyes move over my face, searching.

"It's just the rain," I lie.

"You should get out of it. You'll catch something." He has to raise his voice over the sound of it hitting the ground between us.

"I want to dance in it."

"Amara, I really don't think that's—"

"Please." I give him puppy eyes. I can't tell him this might be my last moment of freedom and to please indulge me.

He squeezes my hands, and we start moving, with him tripping over his own feet trying to spin me the way I show him. Both of us die laughing at how bad he is at this.

He pulls me in on the last spin, and my body slides flush against his, and he's looking at my mouth with hunger.

I've counted the men I've kissed on one hand my whole life, and exactly all of it happened before Matteo came into my life.

Some part of me already knows this is unforgivable—that I'm putting Adrien at risk. I know it. I do it anyway, because the alternative is going into that marriage having never once chosen anything for myself.

I go up on my toes and kiss him.

And instead of warmth, all I feel is cold.

I'm freezing.

And I already know exactly why.

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Chapter Seven

Amara

In a whirl of movement I don't even register, Adrien is pushed off me, landing on the ground in a brutal fall.

"Adrien!" I scream. Suddenly, I no longer appreciate the water droplets on my skin. The freezing downpour turns punishing. I feel cold, shivering like a wet dog as the wind cuts straight through my soaked clothes.

I rush to check on Adrien, who appears to have passed out from the brunt of the fall. He lies completely motionless.

I've done this.

I've hurt an innocent man for my own selfish reasons. For wanting to taste freedom, even for just a second. For wanting to taste a kiss that isn't forced.

I'm held back by both arms by rough hands. Wrenching me around, I come face-to-face with a nightmare. My own personal nightmare.

Matteo's face. It is a face whose handsomeness has been utterly soured by the look of pure evilness on it. It's a look so devoid of humanity that I shiver for far more reasons than just the freezing dark around us.

His rough hold becomes even tighter on my arms, and I grimace against the pressure.

"Mr. Russo," I cry, trying to pull away. "Please. Let me go."

And I mean it in more ways than one. I want him to let go of me in all the ways a person lets go of someone. I want him to free me from this cage.

He does, releasing me so suddenly that I stumble back lightly, immediately massaging my arms where he held me. Surprisingly, despite the roughness of his hold, my arms aren't sore. How does he do that? How does he exert that much control?

He tilts his head slowly, analyzing me like he can read my exact thoughts. "Don't mistake it, my love. I could never hurt a single strand of hair on your head."

His finger coils around a strand of my hair that turned curly under the constant stream of water. He lifts it to his nose, smelling it, and his eyes roll back.

When he finally pulls back, he hisses, "But I can hurt anyone who isn't you. Do you understand me, Amara?"

My eyes trail back to the man who is still unconscious, his body curled in on itself. The rain washes my tears away as fast as they fall. As if the skies could tell what an absolute nightmare this is for me, a crack of thunder echoes overhead.

My heart hurts for him. The guilt is unbearable, and I want nothing more than to check on him. To apologize for dragging him directly into the den of monsters where I live.

"Do. You. Understand?" He enunciates each word of his question, pulling on my hair a little tighter to force my face up toward his.

I stare into his dark eyes. "I understand."

"Good girl," he mutters. He brings a hand to the back of my hair and pushes me closer to press a kiss to my forehead.

"I trust you not to betray your future husband. You won't give me a reason to doubt that, will you?" he whispers against my skin. His hot breath is a contrast to the ice-cold drops falling on us. It makes goosebumps erupt all over my skin.

The term "future husband" mixes instantly with my churning stomach acid and despair, making me want to throw it up straight back into his handsome face.

But, for my own safety and for the safety of the man currently lying helpless on the ground, I obey. You can't survive this world without obeying the monsters in charge.

"No reason for doubt," I lie as my nails dig deep into my palms. My chest heaves as I begin to hyperventilate.

He gently caresses my face and my wet hair. "I know all about your past, Amara. And I overlook it. Because it's your past. *He's* your past now. You just acted out a little before settling down."

I get his drift. He's forcing me to break up with Adrien. My eyes stay settled on the other man, desperately hoping he's not hurt badly from the fall.

Having absolutely no choice, I swallow my pride and mutter, "You're right."

But he's not right. Adrien isn't just some meaningless fling for me. He's the first man I've ever chosen for myself, by myself. And because of that choice, I caused him harm.

"Don't get things wrong again, my love," Matteo says. "Let me make the dynamic of our relationship very clear to you. I am a weapon. Think of me as a rifle placed directly in your hands. Where that rifle points depends entirely on where your eyes stray. Any other man you look at—any man who isn't me—you just aimed the barrel at him. And ultimately, when it shoots, you're the one who pulled the trigger. Not me. The weapon was simply in your hands."

His words hit me like a punch straight through the gut. They make my knees weaken and buckle completely under me. Before I hit the wet ground, he catches me by the waist.

I did this.

The thought loops in my head. It's me who hurt Adrien. I pointed the gun.

But am I really this undeserving of a normal life? I can't even have a crush, or date, or be with someone I actually chose? I feel like a fly caught in a spider's web. An insignificant insect.

"You know what I'm capable of. You know that if you even breathe next to another man while looking at him with those eyes that belong only to me, I will torture him. I will gut him alive until he's completely unrecognizable. You know that."

"I know that," I whisper, feeling small, like a tiny insect he can crush under his boot whenever he wants.

He carries me over and puts me down on the bench gently. He wraps his dry jacket around my shivering shoulders. Suddenly, I want to be back in his arms again. Not because I love him, but because the moment he steps away, I can see him heading straight toward Adrien on the ground.

"Please, don't hurt—" I don't even get to continue the sentence before he stops and glares back at me.

"If you beg for his life, or say another word about him, I will make it so much worse, Amara," he hisses.

I bite my tongue, forcing myself to shut up as I watch him pull a silver blade from his pocket. The sharp click of the knife opening echoes over the rain. My heart is in my throat; it feels like it's beating rapidly in my esophagus, choking me.

No. God, please no.

Adrien jolts awake the moment the blade cuts one side of his lip open, slicing through the flesh all the way to the middle of his cheek. He starts screaming and sobbing in agonizing pain as the devil works with his knife.

Not being able to handle the sight or the sound of it anymore, I lean over and throw up into the wet grass next to the bench.

Matteo stands up slowly, wiping the blade. “Lips that touch my Amara,” he murmurs into the dark, “will be mutilated.”

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Chapter Eight

Amara

"Amara. Amara!"

The voice snaps me out of my trance, startling me out of the dark thoughts consuming my mind.

"Yeah? Sorry," I blink, pulling myself upright. "I was daydreaming."

My ballet instructor scowls down at me, her brow furrowed in concern as she reaches out to touch my forehead. "Are you feeling okay? You look sick."

No. No, I am not feeling okay.

It's been two days since what I can only refer to as the incident, and Adrien has not responded to a single one of my frantic texts. I would still be worrying whether he is dead or alive if it weren't for a mutual friend on social media. They posted a story together in the hospital, letting me know he survived.

I figured out it's the exact same hospital he interns at, but I refuse to go there until he tells me I can. I won't trample all over the space he so clearly needs from me right now. And he has every right to need it.

I hurt him.

I brought the devil straight to his feet. I swear it was never my intention. I never wanted to harm him in any way, shape, or form. I just wanted that all-consuming love I read about in books and saw in movies.

And now, a pathetic, selfish, tiny part of me is disappointed. I think I hoped Adrien would stand between me and the world. I craved that naive, cinematic love so badly—the kind where the boy somehow comes up with a brilliant plan, gets my monster off my back, and we live happily ever after.

I'm so immature. But can anyone really blame me? He's my first real relationship. I never got to experience that silly teenage love, so it is hitting me now in my twenties. And it's embarrassing.

What am I going to do?

“Amara, you’re doing it again!” the instructor sighs, shaking her head. “I really think you should go home. You’re flushed and unfocused.”

I shake my head frantically. This studio is all I have left that's mine. If I go back to that house, I will lose it.

“No, really. I’m good,” I insist, forcing a tight smile. “I’m just tired. That’s all.”

She twists her lip, clearly not believing me, but she turns and walks to the other side of the room. It seems I am not the only one going through hell today.

Emily is a beautiful woman in her mid-thirties who always used to show up to class wearing oversized sunglasses and long sleeves. All of us secretly suspected she was being abused by her husband. But any lingering suspicion evaporates when we look at her right now. She is so battered she can barely move. Yet she came to the studio anyway, and we all know it’s for refuge.

My heart breaks into pieces for her.

The rest of us don’t know how to act. Nobody stares at her, but the studio is small, and dancing around a broken woman feels entirely wrong. We are paralyzed by the awkwardness—should we talk to her? Ignore it? Call the police? I don't know. Everything about today feels entirely wrong.

“Chop, chop, ladies. Up you go!” the instructor says, clicking her fingers to break the tension while her other hand gently caresses Emily’s hair.

With a heavy sigh, I force my aching body to move.

We don’t even have time to get into our starting positions before the heavy wooden door to the studio breaks open with a crash.

My heart drops straight to my stomach, imagining it’s Matteo coming to drag me away. But it’s a stranger. An older man with an ugly snarl twisted on his face and bright yellow teeth. He’s wearing a cutout shirt that shows his hairy torso, and his foul stench fills the studio immediately.

The piercing scream from Emily on the floor makes it instantly clear who this man is. It’s her husband.

The blood pumps furiously through my veins as her screams turn blood-curdling. My body goes into fight-or-flight mode.

The man pounces, charging straight toward Emily. Oh, hell no. The instructor tries to step in, turning her body into a human shield, but he flings

her away like a ragdoll. The two other girls in the room scramble backward, huddling together in the corner.

I can't let him hurt her.

Using every ounce of the pent-up energy, rage, and frustration tearing through me, I fling myself directly at him. My shoulder smashes hard into his abdomen, the impact knocking him to the floor. The moment he's under me, I use my elbows, ramming them down three times. Once into his face, then his neck, then his chest. Wherever I can make contact.

"You bitch!" he roars, spitting dark blood across the floor. "I'm going to make you regret that!"

"Ahhhh!"

A primal scream tears from my throat as his face suddenly blurs. It stops being the face of a stranger. In my mind, it morphs into Matteo. Then into my father. Then into every single person in my life who has ever hurt me and stripped away my choices.

We exchange hits, but I don't even feel the pain of his blows. I wrap my hands around his throat, choking him.

The instructor limps closer, her face pale, and smashes a vase straight into his head.

The man goes completely limp, passing out on the floor, and only then can I finally breathe.

"Amara, we need to call an ambulance," the instructor whispers, her hands shaking as she clasps mine. She turns to the corner of the room. "Girls! Call an ambulance right now!"

I look down at the unconscious man, wondering if he's going to be okay. I don't want to have killed him. It seems like this world has already taken much more of me than I ever imagined. It has stolen my innocence, and I'm becoming a monster just like all of them.

"I couldn't give a shit about him," Emily hisses as she pulls me away from his body. "Amara, you're bleeding."

"I'm bleeding?" I ask, touching my face. My vision begins to blur.

Through the haze, I am dimly aware of the woman I saved. She is thanking me desperately. I notice the fabric of her pants is darker in the crotch area; I think she peed herself out of terror.

And then everything becomes chaotic as the studio door opens again. Men walk into the room. There are maybe six of them. Who are they?

Before darkness pulls me under and I black out completely, I hear one of them curse loudly.

"Shit. The boss is going to kill us."

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Chapter Nine

Matteo

Drip. Drip. Drip.

That sound has always done more for me than the ocean ever could. Waves are supposed to be calming, and I've never bought it. *This* is calming. This is the only sound in the world that has ever been able to calm me down.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Divine justice has a rhythm, and it sounds like this. Like the fucker who put his hands on my girl finally running out of blood to spill.

I take another pull off the cigar, the smoke dragging through my blood-stained hand, and let it curl out through my nose while I look at what's left hanging from the ceiling. My left hand's damaged—and it's been shaking worse the longer I go, animated tremors that only show up after hours like this.

He's open from sternum to navel. The skin and muscle that used to keep his organs where they belonged are gone, and now they're just hanging there with everything else, glistening under the one light I left on. There's a knife buried straight through his heart, and a second one lodged down his throat deep enough to have found a lung. I don't know the exact minute he died. I know it took a long time getting there, and I know every second of it was torture for him.

Because two wings over, my girl is asleep with a bruised eye and a lip split open, and I've had the nurses check her ten separate times because I don't trust anyone's competence right now, mine included.

None of this would have happened if the man I put in charge of her security had done one job. *One*. Instead, he was thumbing through some card game on his phone while my future wife got dragged into a brawl trying to protect a room full of women.

Two knocks. Lorenzo's knock.

"Come in," I say, my voice scraped down to gravel from the hours I spent screaming at a dying man.

He steps in without meeting my eyes, which tells me exactly how I must look right now.

"Clean-up crew?" he asks.

I stand, walk over, and put my cigar out in something that used to be intestine. Smells like it, too.

"Yes." I roll my shoulder, feel it pop. "How's Nathan holding up?"

"Two weeks in the hospital, probably longer." He's already dialing the number for the cleaning service that handles this shit.

Nathan deserves that shit. It ensures that next time, he'll be more diligent protecting my woman.

"And my future wife."

His eyes come up too fast, then correct themselves before I can call him on it. Eleven years he's worked for me. He remembers what I used to be like around women—which is to say, nothing, an itch handled quickly, an inconvenience I mostly skipped altogether because my own hands were less trouble.

Now I want a wife. *Her*. Only her. He hasn't said a word about it, and he knows better than to start now.

"She should be waking up soon. Nurses are posted outside like you asked."

"Good." I leave him to the body and go shower because if she wakes up and the first thing she sees is me painted in the blood of the man who hurt her, it won't buy me anything with her. She doesn't reward me for the things I do in her name. She hates them.

I dismiss the nurses with one finger raised and walk into my room, where I put her.

She's on my bed, in my shirt—I changed her myself, nobody else touched her, I made sure of that—and the sight of her there does something to my blood that makes it steam. Then I see the bruise blooming under her eye, and whatever was starting up in me dies.

My beautiful, reckless, selfless girl.

I sit beside her, move a piece of hair off her face, press a kiss to her forehead. I don't realize how long I've been holding my breath until I'm finally close enough to her to let it out.

Her eyes open, and she blinks up at me for exactly one second before she's scrambling backward.

"Where am I?"

"My estate. My room. My bed." I don't blink either.

"What am I doing here?" She winces, her hand flying to her split lip.

"Fuck, baby." My chest actually hurts. "I'm sorry."

I grab the water and the two pills the nurses left, and I set the pills on her tongue myself while she glares death at me the entire time. When she reaches for the glass, I click my tongue and hold it to her mouth instead, tipping it slowly.

"Thank you." She won't look at me, picking at her thumbnail instead. "I'd like to go home now."

"You can't," I say it gently. "I want you where I can see you until I know you're actually fine."

Her eyes finally come up to mine, and God help me, they still do exactly what they've always done to my pulse.

"There's no need. You should see the other guy." She scoffs like it's a joke.

Oh, baby. You really should see the other guy. I'd walk you down there myself if I thought for one second it would earn me anything but another reason to hate me.

"I want to take care of you." I tilt my head. "Through thick and thin. Remember?"

She said those words. But not to me. And I don't plan on ever putting it down.

Her breath catches, and she shoves her hair back. "I've known exactly who you are for three years. Don't dare even believe that you feigning concern is going to convince me you've turned into a different man overnight."

My jaw tightens. *Feigning*. Like this isn't the realest thing I've felt for another human being in my entire life.

"Do you actually think I'd let anyone put their hands on my future wife and walk away from it?"

She drops her face into both hands at future wife. She'll get used to it. I'd have given her more time to get used to it if she hadn't gone and gotten herself interested in someone else.

"Thank you for whatever you did after the—the accident. I'm not even going to ask how you knew where I was, or that something was wrong. But thank you. Now I'd really like to go home, Mr. Russo. I'd like to be left alone."

"You didn't ask about him. The man, I mean." I keep my voice low.

Her head snaps up out of her hands. "Because I already know his fate, Mr. Russo."

I like that she knows that a man doesn't touch what's mine and keep breathing.

"So you believe in fate," I say.

She stares at me like I have two heads, and then laughs, but there's no humor in it at all. "I can't do this. I genuinely cannot stand you, or whatever performance this is supposed to be." She sits up straighter despite the pain she's in. "What fate? You've decided what I eat, what I wear, who I'm allowed to talk to, for three straight years. You've threatened people I care about just for existing near me. I've had no fate. All I had was you."

Did she love him? The thought comes and goes fast because if I let it simmer, I'll commit a fucking massacre.

"You shouldn't speak to your future husband like that," I say instead, my tongue clicking against my teeth.

"Future husband," she mutters in disgust.

I reach over and tuck the same strand of hair back again with my left hand that's still trembling because I want an excuse to touch her.

"Yes. Future husband. Don't waste your time imagining a version of this where I let you go. I don't function without you, Amara. Not even death gets to separate us—we go into the ground together."

She leans in close enough that I feel her breath land on my mouth, and for one starving second, I think she might actually—

"Fuck. You."

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Chapter Ten

Amara

No amount of concealer can hide the bruise under my eye. It's gone past purple into a sick yellow-green. I look like what I am. Which is a combination of things—getting beaten trying to protect the women in the studio, waking up in Matteo's bed with no memory of how I got there, and the fact that a man died screaming somewhere in that estate because he touched me.

My phone buzzes with Adrien's text. Finally, after days of silence that I filled entirely with my own frantic, unanswered texts.

You can come see me at the hospital, if you want.

If I want.

Like I haven't been thinking about him nonstop, wondering if he hates me, if I did this to him just by letting him near me in the first place.

I drink water to chase the bitterness down, and my split lip screams at the contact. He was never just a boyfriend. He was my friend before any of it.

The smart thing—the safe thing—is to disappear from his life without a word. But I'm selfish. I want one conversation before I let him go. Maybe we can still be something. Friends, at least.

My father hasn't been home since the incident where he told me about the fact that Matteo claimed my hand in marriage. He's sleeping in his casinos now, probably drinking himself unconscious across a card table.

The second I step outside, my neck prickles. I've felt watched for years, but this is different. I count five black cars along the street, not the usual one or two. Matteo's tightened the leash since the brawl, and it makes

something ignite low in my stomach, hot enough that I could probably breathe fire if I tried.

Why can't he just let me go?

I know what he's done for my father. I know, by extension, what that's meant for me. But none of it was ever generosity. Every dollar he's spent keeping us afloat bought him another year of owning me. I haven't felt like a person in three years. Being attached to someone who won't let you leave isn't love. I feel like a dog.

And if it were love—what then? I'd spend the rest of my life not knowing who the bullet is going to hit first. Me. Him. A child neither of us has had yet.

The cars follow me all the way to the flower shop. I buy the biggest bouquet they have and a card that says *Get Better Soon*.

Outside the hospital, I stall on the sidewalk. I'm afraid of what's waiting in that room. I go in anyway, because whatever else I am, I'm not a coward, and Adrien deserves better.

The receptionist points me down the hallway. Outside his door, an older woman sits in a plastic chair with an IV line taped into the back of her hand, and she has his exact eyes. My heart trips over itself. I duck into the room and shut the door behind me quickly.

He looks smaller than I remember. Two pillows prop his neck up, there's a bandage wrapped over one side of his skull, a brace holding his neck stiff, and stitches tracking from the corner of his mouth halfway up his cheek.

"Hi," he says, and it looks like it hurts him to even speak. It takes me a second to realize my own mouth's been opening and closing with nothing coming out.

"Hi." I finally get the word out and cross to set the flowers on his bedside table.

"Thanks." He smiles, and the stitches pull white. I look away.

"I'm sorry," I manage.

"Why are you bruised? Did he hit you too?"

"No." I tell the truth.

"Are you covering for him?"

"I'm not." I shake my head, and he studies me for a long time before sighing and letting it go.

"Police can't find the guy who did this."

They won't find him. Matteo's reach runs straight through every department that would be looking.

"I'm sorry," I say again.

The silence stretches long enough that I know what's coming before he opens his mouth again.

"Listen, Amara." His thumb runs over the stitches, and I want to tell him to stop before they open back up, except I've lost the right to tell him anything. "You're a good person. Beautiful, funny, all of it. But I don't feel safe around you anymore. I think that man's connected to you somehow. I think a lot of this is connected to you somehow."

I hear my own heart break, which feels absurd, since I don't have the right. This is the price of wanting something I was never allowed to have. Every stupid fantasy I built dissipates, and it's nobody's fault but mine.

"I think we should take a break," he says. "I'm sorry."

I make myself look at him and nod. "I understand. And I'm sorry, too. For all of it. You didn't deserve any of this. You're a good man, Adrien. One of the only genuinely good ones I've met."

He squeezes my hand.

"I hope you get everything you've been working for," I mutter.

He lifts my hand to his mouth and kisses my knuckles, the stitches rough against my skin. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect you from whatever it is you're running from. I hope you get your boring Tuesdays someday."

I give him a sad smile.

"Goodbye."

I let myself out and shut the door, and I make it four steps down the hallway before a hand closes around my elbow.

It's his mother.

"Hello, ma'am, I—"

"Save it." Her voice is weak. "I want you away from my son."

She's frail—patches of scalp showing through where the treatment's taken her hair. I can't bring myself to hate her for this. She's not wrong.

"You'll get that," I say. "I promise."

Surprise flickers across her face, then something colder replaces it.

"I know exactly what you are." Her breath smells like burnt coffee, which I know can't be good for her, and I bite my tongue instead of saying so. "Girls like you are dangerous. My son can't shield you from whatever filth you're running from, and I won't watch him die trying."

She presses something cold into my palm. The diamond necklace I gave Adrien to buy her a few more rounds of treatment.

"And I don't want your money. Blood money doesn't fix anything."

She's already seen straight through me.

"Please, keep it." I close her fingers back around the stone. "Consider it an apology for every bad thing that's happened to your family since I walked into your son's life. And you don't have to worry—I won't contact him again. Please take care of yourself. And take care of Adrien. Goodbye."

I take a breath, begging myself not to cry. It would just make this whole thing more mortifying.

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Chapter Eleven

Matteo

She went to **him** again.

I wonder how many pieces of him she'd want left if she won't fucking give him up. *I* am what's been decided for her. Whatever God exists clearly built her life around one outcome, and it's me.

Other men can go to hell.

Torturing him gets me nothing. Killing him gets me less than nothing—it hands her a martyr to grieve instead of a man to forget. I've spent thirty-two years learning exactly how to take a man apart piece by piece, and every instinct I own is screaming to use that education on him right now.

I don't. Because my end goal was never his suffering. It's her. It's always been her, and a smart man doesn't let the smaller appetite ruin the larger one.

So I walk into his hospital room in broad daylight. His mother's asleep in the chair outside, oblivious. I lock the door behind me, and I've already made sure the staff on this floor understand that whatever they hear from this room this afternoon isn't their business.

He's asleep. Snoring, even.

I try to be reasonable walking up to that bed. I really do try. But this is the man who put his hands where mine belong.

My left hand—the damaged one—closes around his jaw and squeezes. His stitches give first, unraveling along his cheek, and his eyes snap open wide.

His mouth opens on a scream I silence before it starts, one finger pressed to my lips.

"Shh."

I'm doing him a favor, using the weaker hand.

"Not. A. Sound."

My left hand shakes with the effort.

He nods, swallows, grimacing at the taste of his own blood filling his mouth from the reopened cut.

"I have a proposal for you." I lift a brow. "Are you going to make this difficult?"

"No—no." The word comes out wet, and I let go, flexing the hand out at my side.

I find the chair by the window, turn it backward, and sit with my arms folded over the top of it, lighting a cigar. He watches me with just his eyes, the brace holding the rest of him still.

"You're getting married," I tell him.

His eyes go impossibly wide. "W-what? You're not—you're not here to kill me?"

I wish. God, I wish.

"Quite the opposite." I tap ash onto the tile. "I'm here with the best deal you'll get offered in your entire short, mediocre life."

He searches my face for the trick before dropping his eyes to the blanket instead. "Married to who? Amara?"

Hearing her name in that hopeful, boyish tone out of his mouth makes me lose my mind. I blink once. Twice. Try to push the red haze back down.

It doesn't work. And I come back to myself holding a fistful of his hair, my face an inch from his.

"Don't. Ever. Say. Her. Name. Again."

"I'm sorry—okay, okay, okay." He gasps it out. Only then do I step back, watching him drag air in through his monstrosity of a mouth.

"You're marrying a woman of my choosing," I say. "In exchange, every cent of your student debt disappears. Your mother's treatment gets covered in full. For as long as she needs."

His head comes up too fast, and he groans, a hand flying to the brace. "Really? And if I agree—I'm safe? You'll actually leave me alone?"

It was that easy for him. That's the part that makes me want to laugh and put my fist through the wall in the same breath—how quickly he'll trade her. He's not worth the dust her shoes track through a room. It disgusts me. It also solves my entire problem in one conversation, so I'll take it.

This way, she'll watch him marry someone else and decide on her own that he was never worth the risk. She'll hate him for it, and she'll never go looking for him again. Perfect.

"As long as you keep your mouth shut, marry the woman I put in front of you, and never come near my Amara again—you're safe. What do you say?"

I let the silence sit and stretch until it's uncomfortable.

"Yes," he finally agrees.

I bend forward, laughing, because this coward got to hold her hand, kiss her cheek, sit across from her in the rain, and he's giving her up just like that.

He looks terrified watching me laugh.

"You never loved her," I say once my fit of laughter ends.

"I did." His jaw sets. "Do you? Because from where I'm sitting, it looks like you just want to own her. That is exactly what she's been running from."

Would you look at that. The wannabe doctor's got a spine after all.

"Whether you understand it or not," I say, "I love her more than you're capable of loving anything."

"Are you sure?" Blood's running down his chin, staining the collar of his gown red. "Because she was running from you straight into me. You don't get to cage someone and call it love."

He knows I won't kill him when he agreed to the deal. Knowing that gave him just enough room to grow a backbone. Fine. I don't mind putting him back in his place either way.

"One day," I tell him, leaning down until we're eye level, "she'll be in my arms, in my house, fully mine, and she'll understand that she owns just as much of me in return. I'll even invite you and your new wife to dinner, just so you can watch it in her eyes yourself."

"Impossible." He wipes blood off his chin with the sleeve of the gown, smearing more than he clears.

Nobody gets to tell me what's possible about a woman I've spent years building an entire life around.

"What exactly did your love do for her?" I straighten, looming over him. "You gave up on her. I would burn down every port I own, every man I've bought, become the thing she hates most in this world, just to keep her. I would take lives and burn the world for her. What would you do? What did you ever actually do?"

His answer is the last thing I need to know exactly how far beneath her he's always been.

"I'd stay quiet," he sighs. "I'd admit I lost. I'd disappear and take your deal because fighting you would only get her hurt worse than losing me ever will. I won't try to have her when I know it's impossible for both of us."

And that's exactly why he'd never be worthy enough of her. Only *me*.

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Chapter Twelve

Amara

Laughter doesn't do much against the vice currently squeezing every organ behind my ribs. It makes eating, breathing, and existing almost impossible. And still, I keep eating. Mia made this whole spread by hand, and I'd rather choke than not show her the appreciation she deserves.

I take another bite even though my stomach feels cinched with a rubber band.

Between everything my life's turned into, I barely make it out to see her anymore. Part of it, if I'm honest, is that I'm a little afraid of her husband.

Nino runs the Cosa Nostra. Six-foot-seven of a man whose muscles have their own muscles, and on a good day he strings together maybe four words to anyone who isn't Mia. Everyone else in his orbit gets grunts. I got a nod when I walked in, which apparently counts as a warm welcome by his standards.

It's almost funny watching him sit at the head of the table, staring at his wife like she's his whole world. Because to him, she is.

She doesn't seem to notice, too busy leaning over to take their toddler out of his arms, pressing a kiss to his stubbled jaw on the way. I watch six-foot-seven of certified terror melt on contact. Four years married, and he still goes soft like a teenager every time she does that.

She hands me their daughter, Daisy, and finally, for the first time since I walked through the door, I manage a real smile. I figured Nino would keep her hostage in his lap the whole visit.

Getting to hold her is worth risking the look Nino's currently aiming at me like I might drop her.

"She's the cutest baby I've ever seen," I tell Mia, kissing Daisy's chubby cheek while small fists grip a fistful of my hair and yank. Worth it.

Nino's chest puffs up in the corner of my vision. I bite the inside of my cheek so I don't laugh out loud at a man built like a tank turning into a proud girl dad.

"Well, I'm biased. She's mine," Mia says, kissing her other cheek, "but yes. Objectively the cutest baby alive."

"How's the lasagna?" she asks, and something in Nino's expression dares me, silently, to say anything other than glowing. I angle my body slightly away from him.

"It's incredible," I say. "You have to send me the recipe."

"Found it online, actually. Tried something new with the béchamel—"

A knock cuts her off mid-sentence. She glances at Nino, brows pulling together. "Expecting someone?"

He nods once, already standing.

I know who it is before the door even opens.

Matteo.

Every part of me wants to get up and leave right then, except I'll be damned if he makes me run even from my friends. I keep talking to Mia and smiling at Daisy while Matteo and Nino move to the head of the table and start talking business.

His eyes never once leave mine.

I adjust the collar of my shirt because I feel like I'm suffocating. Even in my best friend's house, with her husband armed and territorial six feet away, he still finds a way to make the room feel like it belongs to him.

Mia notices my awkwardness, plucking Daisy back out of my arms. "Hey. You good?"

She doesn't know anything about Matteo. I didn't want her looking at me with pity.

"Just need the bathroom," I say, and get up.

I splash water on my face in the guest bathroom, gripping the edge of the sink, breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth.

I'm going to be okay. I'm going to be okay.

I open the door, and Matteo's standing right outside it, close enough that I nearly walk straight into his chest.

My heart takes off at a pace that can't be good for it long-term. I try to step around him, and he catches my wrist before I get anywhere.

"Don't run."

"I'm not running." I keep my voice flat. "I want to go back to Daisy."

"She's currently occupied. Nino doesn't seem inclined to hand her back." He smiles when he says it.

We are not two people who joke with each other.

I try to twist my wrist free, and his grip only tightens. "Stay. Don't pull away from me."

I snap my head up to glare at him, all the hatred I've got directed at him, and he looks back at me with something I can't name.

"Why don't you love me?"

Does he seriously think this is an appropriate time to discuss this?

I yank at my wrist again; he doesn't budge.

"Isn't it obvious? It's this." I tip my chin toward his hand around me. "It's a thousand versions of this. You controlling everything, deciding everything for me."

I finally wrench free and shove at his chest.

"Don't go," he mutters.

"Please." I press two fingers into my temple. "Just—don't do this right now."

"Stop fighting me, Amara."

He steps toward me, and I step back, and the math of that isn't in my favor—I'm going to run out of space to hide soon.

"I wonder what it would feel like," he says, closing the distance between us, "to be loved by you."

Something crosses my face before I can stop it, and he catches it. My back finally hits the wall, and there's nowhere left to give.

"I wonder what it would feel like to touch you. To walk into your heart and never leave."

He closes the last inch, whiskey and expensive cologne crowding my nostrils, and his hand comes up to rest against my throat, his thumb tracing along my collarbone.

"What are you doing?" I bite out.

"Don't be afraid of me." It comes out almost like begging. "Don't."

I turn my face away before his mouth can find mine, and his lips catch my cheek instead.

"Move, Mr. Russo." I try pushing past his arm, caged in on either side by the wall and by him.

He doesn't move. I stop fighting it because it's clear he's not letting me go before he's said whatever he came here to say.

"There's a flaw in the story you tell yourself, my love," he whispers. "You think you're the only one being held captive. But I've been waiting for you to find me. To actually see me. To end the torture you keep putting me through."

"You'll be waiting a long time, then," I spit.

He's trying to paint himself as a victim. All he'd have to do to end his own suffering is let go of me.

"I would give up everything I own," he says. "I would give my life for you to look at me the way you looked at *him*."

I finally get my arm free from the wall and shove past him.

"Don't hold your breath."

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Chapter Thirteen

Amara

I think this qualifies as a life crisis.

What does the rest of my life actually look like now? Matteo's already staked his claim as my future husband, and I have no idea when he plans to make it official—whether he'll wait for me to come around on my own or just drag me down an aisle while I fight him the entire way. Knowing him, he'd prefer the second option.

I've always known, if I'm honest with myself, that whatever I had with Adrien was never going to survive reality. He was the fantasy I got to live in for a few months.

I don't know anymore if I loved him, or if I loved what having him let me pretend. That's an ugly thing to sit with. His mother called me dangerous, and she wasn't wrong—I put a good man in the path of something I already knew he couldn't survive, because my own need to feel normal outweighed my better judgment. I knew what my world does to people who aren't built for it. I brought him in anyway.

And still, underneath all of that, I miss the illusion. I miss being someone who got to be happy. Now there's no distraction left standing between me and exactly what my life is.

Some stupid, stubborn part of me wanted him to be the kind of man from the books I used to read as a teenager—who fights for the girl even when the odds are ugly. I wanted him to not give up on me. I know that's not fair.

The dream where we disappear somewhere Matteo can't reach is dead now, and it's been dead for a while, and I still can't seem to bury it properly. There isn't a country on this planet with a door Matteo Russo couldn't eventually find his way through.

I try to get up, get dressed, and go be a productive human being. Instead, I'm still bed rotting.

As if the universe wants to add insult to injury, my door opens without a knock and Matteo walks in. I don't even have the energy left to be furious about it. I'm just numb, staring at the ceiling.

"Why isn't Arthur here? That's unusual for him."

I ignore the question.

"How did you get in here?" I sigh at the ceiling. "And why don't you knock?"

His brow lifts, unbothered. "Anywhere you exist, I have access. There isn't a lock in this city that keeps me out of a room you're in."

I don't have it in me to argue.

"My father's sleeping at his casino," I say. My whole body goes rigid when the mattress dips under his weight.

I turn onto my side, putting my back to him.

"Why," he says, and I can feel him watching the back of my head.

"You already know why."

He doesn't push it. I feel his mouth against my hairline, and refuse to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. His hand moves into my hair, and I hiss at the contact anyway, because I can't help it.

I hate how he touches me like he owns me.

A small, traitorous voice asks: would it actually be so terrible, being loved by him?

I shut it down. Yes, he's sweet sometimes. Protective, generous, attentive. But he decides everything. That's not love. That might just be the thrill of the chase—and once he's actually got me, what's stopping him from getting bored the way men like him always do? What's stopping him from cheating with the ring already on my finger, becoming with me exactly the monster he already is with everyone else?

And even in the version where none of that happens—where he stays devoted forever—I'd still be a woman who lives permanently inside a filthy world.

I can't do it.

"Didn't you hear," he says.

I sit up, swatting his hand out of my hair. If he came all the way in here just to deliver news, it's not going to be good news.

"Hear what."

The dread pooling in my chest starts eating faster than I can keep up with.

"Tell me. What is it?" I hiss.

"Adrien's getting married."

No.

He's lying. He has to be lying.

How could he move on that quickly, with such total disregard for whatever we had?

"You're lying," I say, searching his face for any crack in it, any tell.

"Have I ever lied to you?"

He hasn't. Out of every terrible thing I could say about him, he's not a liar.

I try to breathe normally and what comes out instead is a choked sob.

Every fantasy I built out of naivety collapses at the same time, all at once.

I get up off the bed and start pacing, not really seeing the room. Matteo is watching me from where he's still sitting.

A scream tears out of me. My hand sweeps across my vanity and a hundred dollars of glass and perfume shatters against the floor.

"No. No, he wouldn't—he didn't give up on me."

None of this attachment makes sense. I know I need to let him go. But he was never just a man to me—he was the friend I made before any of this, the place every naive fantasy of escaping ever came from, and losing that feels like losing a piece of me.

I sob until it turns into hiccups, and what I don't expect—is Matteo lowering himself onto the floor beside me, pulling me against his chest, murmuring against my hair about how Adrien doesn't deserve me, how any man with sense in his head would never have let me go in the first place.

The monster who's obsessed with me is comforting me as I cry over another man.

I don't know what my life has turned into.

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Chapter Fourteen

Amara

The dark's back. Now I can't find the end of the tunnel anymore, or remember what I was even fighting for in the first place.

I feel stupid about it, if I'm honest. For most people, a few months with someone is a blip they easily forget. It didn't even last that long. It shouldn't mean anything. So why am I in so much pain?

He's to be married now. Maybe he got someone pregnant while he was with me? He's the kind of man to do the right thing instead of walking away. So that means he probably slept with another woman while we were still together.

I don't have any anger for her, whoever she is. I don't even have much left for him. The anger is aimed at myself, for building an entire future out of a few weeks. I have no real experience with relationships—but it doesn't make this any less embarrassing.

I don't remember heading back to our bench. Moving on is hard when you lose the escape plan, the friend, and the boyfriend all in the same person.

In the end, I think I gave it weight it never actually had. It was nothing. It has to have been nothing for him.

I wipe my eyes, done crying over this. It happened. I'll survive it. I've survived worse.

Except my luck's been on strike for a while now, because down the path, I catch sight of Adrien. His neck brace is still on, a clean bandage wrapped around his skull, and the stitches along his cheek look worse than they did in the hospital.

The second he sees me, he turns and changes direction.

I go after him.

I catch up and slow to match his pace.

"You gave up on me."

He flinches at my voice and turns, putting a careful two feet of space between us. I feel like I have an infectious disease.

He whispers: "I did. I'm sorry."

He rubs at his cheek, where it must sting him when he speaks.

I don't know what I want out of this. Maybe just closure.

"Congratulations. On the future wedding."

His eyes drop, or would, if the brace let his neck cooperate. "Thank you," he says.

"That was fast. Were you seeing her while we were together?" I don't shy away from asking.

He grimaces. "You know it wasn't like that."

I don't, actually. I have no idea what it was like, and I don't have any claim left to ask. I'm nobody in his life now.

"I wish things had gone differently," I confess.

"So do I." He swallows. "But Amara—you know how it is with you. It's complicated in a way I can't fix. I'm sorry."

I bite my lip and look past him, guilt and grief mixing into something that tastes pungent. He's not wrong. He's never once been the one who made this complicated.

"I understand," I say. "Congratulations. Again."

He looks relieved that the conversation ended, like he's been holding his breath through the whole exchange. "Stay safe, Amara." Then he's walking away.

I know, standing there, that this is the last time I'll ever see him.

It's over.

I hope he gets everything good that's coming to him. And I hope, somewhere down the line, God decides I've earned the same—someone clean. Easy. Ordinary.

Not a man like Matteo.

After that, I go to the only place that's ever actually felt like home. The studio.

I dance until my legs stop cooperating out of spite, until I finally collapse onto the floor in a heap.

They treat me differently now. Ever since the brawl—everyone treats me like I'm fragile. I hate it. I didn't survive that afternoon to get handled like glass.

Emily hasn't come back since. But knowing that Matteo has dealt with her husband, I'm not that worried.

I lie flat on my back, staring up at a ceiling that badly needs a fresh coat of paint and a serious scrubbing. Maybe we'll all pitch in this weekend, the way we've been doing every few months since the studio stopped being able to afford a cleaning service.

My instructor, Amy, lowers herself down next to me. We both stare up at the same water-stained ceiling tile.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

We've been close long enough that lying outright feels wrong, so I give her half of it. "A breakup."

She hums. "Whoever broke up with you is an idiot. You're a genuinely beautiful soul, Amara."

I turn my head toward her, and the smile that comes out of me is wide enough to actually hurt my cheeks. My confidence has been sitting somewhere below sea level for weeks.

"Really?"

"Really, sweet girl." She smiles back, nudges my shoulder with hers. "I know what'll cheer you up."

"Ice cream?"

She laughs, shaking her head. "Better than ice cream."

I sit up and lean my back against the mirrored wall. She mirrors the motion beside me.

"My director friend reached out," she says. "Asked me for the best girl I've got, for a solo routine at the new opera house opening."

"And?" My heart's already picking up—the first spark of excitement I've felt in longer than I can count.

"I told him about a beautiful girl named Amara who's been eating, breathing, and basically sleeping in this studio for years."

"You did?" I exclaim.

"I did."

"I'm—I'm performing?"

"You're performing, my love."

I throw both arms around her and press exaggerated kisses to her cheek while she laughs and swats at me.

I'm so happy. Then the feeling drops out from under me the second I remember there's a name attached to every single thing that happens in my

life whether I invite him or not.

Matteo.

I'll be damned if he ruins this for me. Again.

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Chapter Fifteen

Matteo

I let the cigarette drop and grind it out under my heel, leaning back against the car.

I'm waiting on her to finish training so we can go pick out wedding rings. Just the thought of it does something to my blood, heats it up and makes the front of my trousers tighter.

My ring on her finger.

My name replacing the one she's been carrying instead.

My wife.

I genuinely can't remember a single point in my life before her where I had something as soft as a dream. What I had was a purpose, handed to me young by a father who only had me to inherit everything after he was gone. I did that. I inherited it, expanded it, made it mine.

Then I saw her dancing through a window, bleeding out behind a dumpster with a knife wound still open in my side, and for the first time I dreamt of something.

I dreamt of a place called home—somewhere I'd count down hours to get back to instead of just returning to because the day was over. I dreamt of her fingers running through my beard in the morning, some absurd ring catching the light against my jaw. I dreamt of smaller versions of her, tearing my house and my heart apart.

I have to have her.

My eyes narrow watching her drown some older woman in kisses on the studio steps. I wonder—and it should embarrass me—what it would feel like if she looked at me like that. I've officially lost my mind over this woman—jealous of an affectionate hug between friends, jealous of both women and men around her.

I shake my head, half amused at my own derangement. I want to catch her. Trap her.

She finally says her goodbyes to the girls crowding the door, and steps out. The bright, easy smile she's wearing dies the second she spots me against the car.

She slings her bag over one shoulder and I'm already moving to take it from her, settling it onto my own shoulder instead.

She looks me over, unimpressed. "What are you doing here?"

"Picking you up."

"Why." She doesn't move toward the open door.

She's the only person alive who's ever dared question me without ending up dead. I'd even forgive her if she fucking put a knife in me. Defiance from her is the only kind I've ever found charming.

"To pick rings," I say, and give her a full smile.

She goes pale, feet shuffling, but eventually she folds herself into the passenger seat. She doesn't look at me once while I round the hood and get in, pulling us out of the lot.

"I think we need to talk," she says quietly, staring out the window.

She wants to *talk* to *me*. I feel I could climb straight out through the sunroof and keep going. She wants. To talk. To me.

"Why do you want to own a woman who doesn't love you, Mr. Russo?"

The floor drops out from under whatever I was floating on half a second ago.

I hate when she calls me that.

I wanted anything else—her routine, gossip about the other dancers, or even the books she's read this week. But even her venom tastes like sugar coming out of her mouth.

"I want you to love me."

I want her texting me photos of the strays she feeds behind the studio. Asking if I've eaten. Worrying when tension's running high in the ports. Waiting in bed with her arms and legs already open for me.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to love you. Not after everything you've done. You know that."

I'd prefer a knife to the heart over the feeling my chest always does every time she reminds me I've got her days, her hand, her future signed and sealed—but not her heart. It feels like dying and then getting slammed back into my body in the same breath, because I still have time. Endless time. Even past whatever comes after this life, I'm not letting go of her in the next one either.

I want her to love me. I'm helpless in her hands.

"You never gave me one real chance." My hands tighten on the wheel. "You decided who I was before you ever let me try to be anything else. I'd lie down in traffic for you and you've never once let that mean anything. Give me a chance, Amara. I'm begging you."

Begging isn't beneath me with her. I can take her time by force, her choices, even her hand in front of a priest. Her heart I can't take. That's the one thing left that has to be given.

She rounds on me, furious, and doesn't seem to notice I've closed most of the distance between our faces until we're sharing the same breath. God, she's beautiful like this—curls loose today instead of straightened, green eyes gone dark with anger, that fair skin flushed at her chest. Everything about her is exactly my type, and I never had a type until she existed.

"You did everything in your power to control me," she says, voice climbing, "and all it ever did was push me further away. You took my choices. My dreams. Even my father. I already know exactly what you are. A man who wants to possess something with zero concern for *how* that *something* feels about it. You did everything except the one thing that might have actually worked."

I file that away calmly. In time, once she starts loving me the way I already love her, she'll understand the control was never separate from the love—it was the love, expressed the only way I know how to express anything. She'll grow into it.

"What's the one thing, baby. Tell me."

What single act would have made her overlook every flaw and choose me the way I've already chosen her?

She smiles, and it's a sad thing. "Letting me go. Giving me control over my own life." She taps two fingers against her sternum.

That's the one request I physically cannot grant. It goes against everything in me.

Still, morbid curiosity wins. "And if I had. Would you have loved me?"

She exhales, wets her lips, and looks out the window again.

"I don't know, Mr. Russo. But at least I wouldn't hate you."

My eye twitches.

Hate.

She hates me. I'd burn down cities, kiss the ground her shoes touch, worship at her feet, and she fucking hates me.

I don't notice how hard I'm clenching my jaw until I try to speak and it cracks. "You liked a man who gave you less than a fraction of what I've given you. Who gave up the second things got difficult."

Liked. I say liked on purpose. I refuse to let the word love anywhere near that man in the same sentence as her.

She goes rigid, angling her whole body toward the window like ignoring me might make me evaporate. I'd have disappeared a long time ago if that tactic worked on me.

"What does he have that I don't," I whisper. "He doesn't love you."

She turns on me like lightning. "Maybe he didn't love me. But you certainly don't either. You don't love me, you want to own me—so shamelessly, so selfishly, it's disgusting. You disgust me."

"What exactly did I do that was so terrible?" I bite out. Every single thing I've done came from loving her. From needing her safe, near, mine.

Her eyes go wide, and then she's laughing, and when she grabs a fistful of my collar I feel my body respond before my brain can catch up and be embarrassed about it. My dick starts to harden. She doesn't seem to care that we're doing sixty and she's got both hands wrapped in my shirt like she might actually shake an answer out of me.

I pull the car over, trying not to laugh out loud. Remi, running security two cars back, swerves to pull in ahead of us and nearly crashes checking the mirror at the sight of her manhandling me through the windshield. Any other man in my position would feel emasculated.

My chest just swells. This is my woman, disciplining me. I'll take anything from her—rage, violence, contempt—over the one thing I can't survive, which is her indifference.

"You stole three years of my life," she hisses, finger jabbing dangerously close to my eye.

"When I had that group project sophomore year," she snaps, "what did you do?"

I run through three years of interventions. There are too many to sort quickly.

"You threatened my professor because two of my teammates were men. I got a C. I had to repeat the entire course. Because of you."

Nobody told me she'd gotten a C. I'd have had it wiped from the record inside a week.

"And my twenty-first birthday, when I wanted to go out with my friends?"

Clubs. That one I remember clearly. "I paid every club in the city to close for the night."

There was no way my girl was going to dance pressed up against strangers.

"Exactly. And how many times did that happen?"

"Five."

"Five. And after that, everyone thought I was a freak. Nobody wanted anything to do with me, because it was obvious something shady was following me around."

"I didn't want you rubbing against sweaty perverts at a club, baby."

She slaps me.

The silence that follows is intense, her whole body coiled, waiting to see what I do with that.

I fight off a smirk, because she *touched* me. Deliberately, with intent, skin on skin.

She realizes what she's done half a second later, staring down at her own palm, horrified at herself. Then she catches the doomed expression on my face and rights herself back into fury immediately.

"And when I wanted to dance professionally," she hisses, her voice breathy.

"Absolutely not. Hell no."

Just the thought pisses me off.

"Exactly," she growls.

"And a hundred other things. A hundred ways you isolated me, trapped me, made me a doll with no say in her own life. Three years. You stole three years."

She's breathing hard by the end of it, chest heaving, having emptied out something she's clearly been carrying a long time.

"No more," she says, quieter now. "Not another year. Not another day. Not even another hour."

"We'll see about that, baby."

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Chapter Sixteen

Amara

"Mmm. Too small, don't you think? I don't love it."

This is the tenth ring the sales assistant has slid onto my finger this hour, and every single one has been beautiful. Admitting that out loud, though, is the day they bury me—liking a ring means Matteo buying it, buying it means me wearing it, wearing it means I've officially agreed to be his fiancée. I'm not actually escaping marrying him. I know that. I'm still going to put up a fight.

The assistant slides on ring number eleven, her facial expression between a grimace and barely-contained hope. If I say yes to this one, her commission alone probably buys her a genuine smile for the next three months. The diamond's so large my finger bends at an odd angle, and I wrinkle my nose at it, real distaste this time. Nothing screams "till death do us part" quite like a stone expensive enough to get your hand relieved of its finger in a parking lot. Fitting, given how many of these rings cost more than five houses.

I shake my head at her again, and she swallows hard before moving to the next case. I feel a flicker of guilt watching her brace herself, but I remind myself she's probably used to indecision. I'm not being difficult because I want something rarer and shinier than everything she's already shown me. I'm being difficult because I don't want a ring. Any ring. At all.

Matteo sits across from me, brows drawn tight, mouth pulled into a twist. He's got an empire to run and instead he's wasting his time here with me. And I have no plans to speed this up.

I don't know if he's clocked exactly what game I'm playing. Then a devilish curve takes over his mouth, and I understand, instantly, that he's already three moves ahead of me.

"I know you can be indecisive, my love." His voice stays warm, almost affectionate. "Perhaps they'll grow on you the longer you look."

I bite down on the inside of my cheek to keep from baring my teeth at him. This man drags out a version of me I don't recognize and don't particularly like.

"What's that supposed to mean." I roll my eyes hard.

He turns to the assistant instead of answering me, and the warmth drops off his face the second I'm not the one receiving it. "We'll take every ring you've shown us today. Please have them packaged. We're on a schedule."

Both of our eyes go wide at the same time. I heard that correctly. My plan just backfired in my face.

"Oh—no, no, no." Both palms come up, waving frantically. "There's no need, I don't like any of—"

He waves me off without even looking at me, that same satanic glint still lit behind his eyes. "No, my love. I'm confident they'll grow on you. All of them, please."

The assistant's eyes go glassy for a second before she blinks it back and nods, professional again. "Right away, sir."

He just bought roughly fifty million dollars in engagement rings to make a point to me, which nets her somewhere close to a hundred thousand in commission, and it's honestly the only thing keeping me from crashing out in the store. She doesn't have to have her day ruined because of the war Matteo and I are currently waging. At least she walks out of it compensated.

"Don't expect me to wear a single one of those," I hiss at him once she's out of earshot.

He shrugs, unbothered. "Eventually, you'll admit you like one. Even if I have to buy out every jeweler in this city first. And when you do, you'll wear it proudly, because it'll be the ring of a man who worships the ground you walk on."

I roll my eyes so far back I half expect to see the back of my own skull. I grab my bag off the counter and head for the door, and he catches my wrist—gently, palm turned up and open, offering me his hand.

God, this day is going to be endless.

I let him have my hand, because I'm saving up my bitter defiance, and we walk out with an assistant trailing bags whose worth can feed a small country behind us.

I'm not telling him about the opera. I'm not telling my father either—if my father knows, Matteo knows within the hour, and if Matteo knows

before opening night, there won't be an opening night. I'm not delusional enough to think he never finds out. I just need him to find out too late to stop it.

By the time he does, I need to already be on that stage. Already applauded, already recognized, and already booked for whatever comes after.

"You're smiling," he says, glancing over as he loads the last of the bags into the car. "See? A day with me isn't so terrible."

He thinks the smile is for him. Poor him.

Guilt flickers through me for half a second, small and unwelcome.

Then I remember exactly how much he’s stolen from me, and the guilt burns off fast.

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Chapter Seventeen

Amara

Everything in my body aches.

I spent the last month avoiding Matteo as much as physically possible, burying all my hours in training with Amy until my feet felt like they're going to fall off. If he noticed the change in my schedule—me coming home late, too tired to even argue with him—he never once brought it up.

He probably assumes I'm softening. Getting comfortable with the idea of being his future wife now that Adrien's out of the picture.

Ha! Not even in his most optimistic fantasy.

It's been a month since he bought me those rings, and true to what I promised myself, I haven't worn a single one. Not even for a day. In a fit of what I'll admit was pure naivety, I brought an idea to my father—pawn them to cover whatever's left of his debt. He just looked away from me. Turns out fifty million doesn't even touch what he actually owes. My father has doomed us both. When did his gambling habit get so bad?

At least Matteo hasn't pushed the rings on me. I think my performance of docility bought me that much patience, small mercy that it is.

I wonder, standing backstage right now, what he's going to do when he finds out where I am. Whether he'll find out before I've even finished. A shiver runs straight down my spine at the thought, and I shove it away hard.

If I don't think it, it won't happen.

If I don't think it, it won't happen.

I close my eyes and force a different picture instead—me finishing my choreography, bowing to an audience, the director pulling me aside afterward with a contract in hand.

The fantasy breaks the second my lungs get squeezed out of order. The wardrobe assistant is lacing a pink corset bodice tight around my ribs, yanking the laces hard.

"Oh, dear." She frowns at the gap she's fighting to close. "Ballet girls really shouldn't carry any softness at the stomach at all. This is a fight. Let's

hope nothing pokes out under the hem."

Heat crawls from my lace collar straight up to my ears. I'm not overweight. I'm not stick-thin either, especially not after a month of Matteo forcing full plates in front of me and me being too tired most nights to argue my way out of finishing them. I haven't been consistent with dieting.

Under normal circumstances, I would have torn her a new one. But I need this contract more than I need to win an argument, so I paste on a bright smile instead.

"You're right, I'm working on it. But trust me—once they see me dance, nobody's eyes are going anywhere near my stomach."

It's not bravado. I belong on that stage, and that certainty is the reason I'm not nervous right now.

Unless it's about Matteo.

I give myself a mental smack across the back of the head.

If you don't think it, it won't happen.

She gives me a thin, apologetic smile and pats my hip once. "Break a leg out there."

She doesn't mean any harm by any of it—this is just the water this industry swims in, and I hate how normalized it is. I check the mirror sideways once she's done, and the small curve at my stomach is barely there at all, nothing close to the disaster she was bracing for.

She's just used to girls who whittled themselves down to bone to keep people like her happy. I won't do that.

Still. Maybe I'll watch it a little closer next week. Just to be safe.

"Look at me," she says, dabbing more blush over my cheeks that are already flushed, tongue between her teeth in concentration. "Don't worry, it'll read beautifully from the seats. You're on in five."

She gives me one last once-over and disappears through the curtain.

Still no nerves. Only excitement because this is actually happening.

I check the mirror one final time. My hair's pin-straight for tonight instead of its usual wave, twisted into a tight bun low on my neck, held with two rhinestone clips. My eyes are dusted in icy shadow, highlighter not skimmed out on—ethereal, not natural, exactly the effect I was going for.

I bounce once on the balls of my feet, check that my pointe shoes are seated right, and spin a slow turn just to watch my tutu catch the light.

I'm ready.

I take my place behind the curtain, waiting on the director's cue and the first notes of the score. I can hear the low murmur of the crowd through the fabric, and my heart starts hammering.

Tens of people out there. Hundreds, maybe.

It doesn't matter which. It's an audience. *My* audience.

The curtain lifts and the first violin note hits, my body moves immediately into the opening port de bras.

I glide into a chaîné turn sequence across the stage, spotting the back wall to keep from dizzying myself. The music swells and I go with it—dancing and dancing and dancing. I spot the same fixed point in the back row each rotation before I drop down onto one bent leg with the other extended out.

The tempo climbs again for the finale—a series of fouetté turns, sixteen of them to be exact. I land the last one perfectly, breathing through my nose so the crowd doesn't notice my chest heaving.

Silence.

One full beat of it before applause rings out.

I saw my entire dream life in that few seconds of silence. Me dancing for a living. Expressing my pain, happiness, and everything I've ever lived through on that stage.

Then I start to bow.

And that's when the gunshots start.

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Chapter Eighteen

Matteo

The devil's good at whispering. Convincing people to cross a line, tell one lie too many, decide a little theft won't get noticed.

In my world, there's no forgiveness for a man who betrays the responsibility handed to him. Run a port where hundreds of millions move through every week, and eventually somebody on the payroll gets weak. Somebody starts listening to that whisper. Starts thinking the money passing under his hands might as well pass through his pockets instead.

They think I don't notice. I always fucking notice.

Which is why I've got both hands buried to the wrist in the open stomach of a man who thought he could carry a rare, custom-order drug out of my port through his intestines.

My phone rings. I let it die. It rings again immediately, and only one person on this earth has the nerve to call me back twice in a row—Lorenzo, and he only ever does it when something's wrong.

I wipe my hands down my pants, nose curling at the smell coming off them, shit and blood. Doesn't matter. This client's high enough that I'll walk home covered in it if that's what finishing the job requires.

"Make it fast," I hiss into the phone, tossing a sealed bag onto the counter with the rest.

"Something's off. With Amara."

"What?" I shout.

"Remi's been tracking her. She went to that new opera house, but there's no ticket purchase on her cards. We checked twice."

I motion the men to take over, put the call on speaker, and head for the sink to scrub off what I can. "That's not strange. Maybe a friend invited her."

Already, though, I'm doing the math on how fast I can get there myself.

Something careful enters Lorenzo's voice. "Remi says he saw her in a tutu. Pointe shoes. It looks like she's performing."

What.

The.

Fuck.

I told her no. I have told her no more times than I can count, in more languages than the one she's using now to lie to my face by omission.

No to her dancing in front of a room full of strangers.

No to some man in the fourth row recording her on his phone to replay later, alone, in the dark, jerking off to the footage.

No to putting herself somewhere exposed, somewhere any fucker with a grudge against me could put a bullet through her.

And underneath all of that—no to her doing any of it without so much as telling me. I wouldn't have allowed it regardless. But that's not even the point tonight. The point is she didn't ask. She just went.

"I'm coming. Where?"

"The new one, down the block from her studio."

I check my watch and swear under my breath. "Forty minutes."

"I'll box the building. Remi takes the front, I take the back. Anything else?"

"No man touches her," I growl. "No one."

"Understood." He hangs up, and I finish giving the men their instructions before I'm moving.

For forty minutes, I stew.

I stew on the fact that my girl hid this from me. I stew on every act of defiance she's handed me for three years running, back to back, refusing at every single turn to stand at my side. I've tried patience. I've tried making the future unmistakably clear while still giving her room to arrive at it on her own. All that's bought me is a woman who waits until my back's turned.

By the time I pull up outside the opera house, the tension's traveled from my fingertips down to the soles of my feet. My left hand's shaking worse than it has in months—I've spent the entire drive with a death grip on the wheel.

Lorenzo's leaning against the wall out front and straightens the second he sees me.

"Just wrapping up, sir. Crowd looks impressed."

Of course they're impressed. She's talented. Radiant. Charisma and mystery dripping off her.

And every man in that audience noticed. Every single one is currently trying to unravel a mystery that belongs to me and only me.

Mine.

I step inside in time to see her mid-bow, and for one second I forget to be furious, because she looks like something that shouldn't exist on this earth—way too fucking beautiful for her own good.

"God, she's hot," comes from somewhere to my right, entirely too casual for a man discussing my future wife.

"You're disgusting, at least pretend you're not staring," a woman beside him hisses—girlfriend, probably, judging by the venom.

I don't fully register raising the gun until the overhead light's already exploding into a hundred pieces of glass.

Lorenzo doesn't need instruction. He melts into the dark on the opposite side of the room, taking out light after light with his own gun. From the front of the house, more shots ring out—Remi, working his own line of fixtures into darkness.

Screams start filling in the space, a sound that matches the hordes of demons in my gut. Once there's enough dark to work with, I put a bullet through the skull of the man who couldn't keep his eyes to himself.

Even in the dim light I catch the spray of it hitting the girl seated next to him. She screams, gags, hands coming up covered in cartilage.

The crowd surges for exits, bodies colliding. The energy of panic tastes like sweat and gutter.

"Find whatever cameras they've got. Wipe them," I tell Lorenzo, and he nods, walking toward the stairs that lead up to what's probably the front office.

My girl is somewhere backstage right now, waiting. She has no idea yet exactly how much hell is waiting for her in return.

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Chapter Nineteen

Matteo

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," I sing, hopping up onto the stage and heading toward the wings.

"Where's my future wife hiding? I didn't peg you for such a bad girl." I kick a chair someone knocked over in their scramble for the exit, sending it skidding into the wall.

I find her exactly where I'd expect—tucked under a couch, knees drawn tight to her chest. Growing up in this world teaches you fast what to do when gunfire starts. You don't bolt blind. You find cover, and wait it out.

She crawls out with a glare, one of her little rhinestone clips missing from her hair, the rest of her slightly rumpled from the floor. Still, somehow, the most beautiful thing on this planet.

We've got all the time we need. Lorenzo's called in extra men to ring the block. This building is mine tonight. Police show up, they see my men, and they find somewhere else to be. The line between the government and my underworld has always been blurrier than either side likes to admit. Corruption is everywhere, and officials are easily bribed.

"It's you." She spits at me, and that's when I catch the blood on both her knees.

I kneel in front of her, guiding her down onto the couch so I can look at the damage. Surface scrapes, nothing deep, but the sight of her blood still riles me up.

"Do they hurt?" I grab an abandoned water bottle off the floor, soaking the corner of my blazer sleeve, and start cleaning the scrapes.

"Fuck. You."

She must be genuinely furious to curse at me. My girl rarely curses.

Once I've confirmed it's only surface level, I finally let myself feel the anger I've been holding since Lorenzo's phone call, and I aim it exactly where it belongs.

"You're lucky it was me who found you first tonight." My jaw tightens around the words. "Did it ever once occur to you why I don't want you performing for a room full of strangers? Any man who's ever wanted to hurt me gets a straight shot at you."

"It wouldn't be a concern at all if you hadn't made me a target in the first place!" She jabs a finger into my chest, hard, again and again. "This is entirely your fault."

"Is that right."

"Yes. Entirely. And don't stand there acting like this is concern for my safety. This is jealousy. You don't want anyone to look at me. You want to make sure I have nobody to rely on except you."

She's not wrong. I'm equally part jealous and concerned. She knows, and that makes the fact that she went behind my back anyway sting worse.

Her hand fists into my collar, dragging me in out of pure fury, and God help me, I'll take any version of her attention over none at all. Anger, hatred, contempt. As long as her eyes are on mine, I'll take it.

"I. Hate. You."

She releases my collar just to shove me back with both hands. "You ruined the best night of my entire life."

Lorenzo's still upstairs handling the footage. Remi hasn't fully adjusted yet to exactly how far my patience stretches for her—the fact that she could put a bullet through me herself, spit on my dead body, and I'd spend whatever afterlife exists looking for her anyway, without a trace of anger left in me by the time I found her.

I hear him rack his gun somewhere behind me, and I turn on him. "Don't you fucking dare."

He goes pale, hands already lifting off the weapon, tucking it back against his hip.

He's never once watched me let someone breathe after raising their voice at me. Let alone hitting me. She's the only exception this world has ever gotten out of me.

"Wait outside the door."

"Yes, sir," he mumbles, eyes cutting to Amara like he still can't quite believe she's standing there unharmed, before he catches himself and disappears.

I turn back to her. "Where were we, baby?"

Both her hands hit my chest again. "Don't call me that. You're ruining my life."

I force a smirk, aware that letting her see exactly how furious I am right now will scare her. "Baby, I'm not exactly thrilled with you either. This stunt—putting yourself in the crosshairs, letting strange men look at what belongs to me, hiding this from me for a month straight—that comes with consequences."

"Consequences?" Her eyes dart between mine, frantic, searching for something. "You think I'm a dog you can train? Diamonds when I behave, gunfire when I don't?"

Whatever she's looking for in my eyes, all she'll ever find is obsession. I've never learned how to hide that from her.

I hate how soft I go the second she actually looks at me.

"I hate to break this to you, Mr. Russo," she hisses inches from my face. "But I will never stop fighting you. To the bitter end. You'll bury me before you break me."

"And you'll see, eventually, that everything I do is for your own good. Every request—which we both know were never actually requests—is for you as much as it is for me. You will not perform again for a room of men who salivate over you, with strangers I can't vet standing close enough to hurt you. No matter how many times you tell me no." My voice drops. "But one day, in my arms, carrying my child in your belly, you'll understand I was right the entire time."

Her snarl bares her teeth—perfect, except for the small endearing crack in one front tooth I've wondered about. I don't get to finish the thought before she's attacking me in earnest, both fists landing against my chest.

It doesn't hurt at all.

But her wish is still my command, in the ways that count. She wants to hurt me. Fine. I'll give her something that actually works.

I catch the edge of the glove on my left hand between my teeth and drag it off. It's not a pretty sight—two fingers gone at odd lengths, scar tissue across the back, the finger beside the missing ones bent at an angle that never healed right. We thought a packaging machine for the drugs would speed up processing. Learning to operate it cost me most of the fine motor control in that hand and nearly cost me the whole arm.

She stops mid-swing, staring between the hand and my face, confusion on her face.

"You want to hurt me. Don't you?" I take her right hand gently with my good one and press it over the damaged one instead. Then I squeeze.

The pain rockets up through my wrist, my shoulder, settles somewhere in my spine, and I bite down hard enough to keep the groan from escaping. She's the only person alive who knows about this—I tell everyone else it's dead nerve, no feeling left in it whatsoever. Letting people know your weakness is how you end up buried.

But she isn't people. She's Amara.

I tighten her grip further, even as she starts trying to yank her hand back, horror flashing across her face.

"Stop it!"

I hold it there, feeling myself get dizzy from the pain.

"Now you know the only thing other than you in this world that is my weakness," I hiss. "I'm asking you to keep it between us. Just ours."

I bite down on the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming as I push her grip tighter still.

"Stop! Please, stop it, Matteo!"

It’s one of those rare times she says my name. Only then do I let go, shaking the hand out, watching it tremble worse than before.

What happens next, I genuinely don't see coming. She bends down, retrieves the discarded glove off the floor, and eases it back over my ugly fingers with gentleness.

"Never do that again," she whispers.

"Why, my love? Don't like watching your future husband in pain?"

She ignores the bait, cradling the hand instead, massaging carefully along the knuckles while watching my face for a reaction. I've never once let another person touch this hand after all the medical intervention ended. Feeling her work the ache out of it sends my eyes rolling back.

She's taking care of me. After everything.

"Don't ever use me to hurt anyone—including you—again," she hisses, still working her thumbs in circles on my hand.

I tip my head back, eyes half closing. "That feels unreasonably good, baby."

She rolls her eyes, though her hands don't stop moving. "Don't misread this. Me doing this doesn't mean I've forgiven a single thing you've done. I'm performing again. That hasn't changed."

I let my head fall back further, chasing the feeling of her soothing an ache only she's ever been trusted with. "I'd love to watch you try."

"Fuck. You." She repeats for the second time tonight—*my, my*, my girl is starting to have a filthy mouth.

"Soon," I murmur.

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Chapter Twenty

Amara

Well, my "punishment" for the little stunt I pulled was the opera house shutting down for "fraudulent behavior," and as if that wasn't enough, I'm now being pressured to wear the ring.

Two mornings ago, he came by to hand-feed me breakfast like always, except this time he slid a ring onto my finger. The most beautiful ring I've ever seen. Diamonds, with rubies lining the edges. The prettiest ring in the whole world.

And he forced it on me, which means it's automatically ugly now. Sometimes I catch myself staring at it, because it's so... ugly. Yeah. Ugly.

I don't understand him. He tells me his one weakness like I'm not going to use it against him. How does he even know I won't? I *could* use it against him if I wanted to. God, he infuriates me.

He also sabotaged the opera house that might've given me a real contract, and I'm pretty sure he made calls to make sure nobody else in the whole city would touch me either.

I shake my head to get rid of the thought before it makes me spiral. Instead, I focus on finishing my hair and makeup. There's another one of those mafia galas tonight, and Mia begged me not to make her go alone, so I'm going even though it's the last thing I want to do.

I wobble downstairs in heels I haven't broken in yet. Out of habit these past few months, I expect the house to be empty, but my father's actually home. Did he run out of casinos willing to let him lose money?

He looks me over and asks quietly, "Where are you going?"

He knows exactly what part he played in this ring being on my finger. Every time he talks to me now, it's quiet. Full of shame.

My chest hurts a little, and I'll never fully understand why it still hurts for a man who shoved me elbows deep into this mess because of his

gambling, and still hasn't stopped. Gambling is his real child. Not me.

Despite the anger twisting in my chest, my legs move toward him anyway, and I press a kiss to his cheek he doesn't deserve.

He pulls me in immediately, wrapping his arms around my waist, face buried in my shoulder. I feel something wet land on my skin. I don't call him out on it.

I cried, too. Where was he?

"A gala. Mia wanted me to go with her," I tell him.

"Be careful," he says, voice rough, and when he lifts his head to look at me, there's no trace of the wetness left behind.

I nod and turn to leave. Five steps in, he says, "I'm trying to stop, Amara. I really am. It's hard."

The breath that leaves me is shaky, and I keep my face pointed at the door. "It's too late for that anyway, Father. Way too late."

"I'm sorry," he mumbles, and if I turned around, I'm sure I'd find him looking at his shoes again. Like I'm not even in the room. Like I don't deserve an apology said to my face instead of the floor.

"Sorry doesn't mean anything now." I walk out.

No tears, Amara. Enough of that.

It is what it is, until I find a way out.

Mia sent a car, and I spot it outside right away. It takes about twenty minutes to get to the gala, some fancy hotel, same as always.

I brace myself to walk in and smile at empty, filthy people. To get looked down on for not being high status enough, for being the girl who's *clearly* here to steal husbands and titles that were never meant to be mine.

What will they think when they see the ring?

Nothing good. I already know that much.

Inside, it's the usual mess of drugs, alcohol, and men measuring their power against each other. A woman near the door glares at me, holding tight to some man who probably runs a decent chunk of his own syndicate. *Of course*. The girl with no real name and a father drowning in debt, just fishing for a rich husband to pull her out of one gutter and drop her in a slightly nicer one.

I find Mia and go straight for her, hugging her tight.

Her eyes go wide at the ring. "Okay, wow. That's massive."

I nod, trying my hardest not to look at it myself. Maybe if I don't look, I can pretend it's not real.

"You sure you don't want me to have Nino talk to him? I bet he could work something out." She hands me a glass of wine off a passing tray.

After the whole opera disaster, I called her and told her everything. She was mad I hid it from her, but she got over it. Her offering Nino is exactly why I didn't tell her sooner. She doesn't understand what she'd be starting. Matteo will treat any interference like a declaration of war, and I'm not dragging more blood onto my conscience because of me.

"No, it's okay. I'll figure something out," I lie.

I have no idea what to do.

The ring catches the light again. Goddamn it. Goddamn everything to hell.

Mia twists her mouth, clearly not buying it, same as I don't buy it myself. But she shows me mercy and changes the subject.

"Do you know how talented you have to be for people to talk more about your performance than the shootout that happened at the same opera house?" She downs her drink. Nino shoots her a warning look from a few feet away, and she just winks at him.

I smile ear to ear this time, because it's true. Despite everything that happened, people are still talking more about the dancing than the gunfire. He tried to paint that whole night black, but I still shone through the cracks.

"Did any other opera house reach out?" Mia asks.

I finish my glass, grab another off a passing tray. "No. I think he made sure of that, too."

Mia sighs and shakes her head. I don't want to talk about my situation anymore.

"How's Daisy?" I ask, and her whole face lights up.

"Perfect, Amara. Absolutely perfect. Last night she threw up right in Nino's mouth. I laughed for three hours straight. He held her up high, she looked down at him, and—*bahhh*."

I bend at the waist, laughing at the image. Cold, terrifying Nino, a man who barely says two words to anyone but Mia and Daisy, getting puked on. He narrows his eyes at us from across the room like he probably knows we're laughing about what happened to him. We both try to hide our snickers behind our hands.

A particular, harsh ray of light from the overhead chandelier reflects off my finger, casting flashes across the room.

Everyone near us gets briefly blinded by the ring on my finger. They've probably heard the rumor by now that Matteo Russo claimed himself a fiancée, but seeing it in person on my hand really drives it home. The old men who wanted him for their daughters, and the daughters themselves who were sold the fantasy of the tortured, rich, dangerous man, all glare at me at once.

"Uh-oh," Mia mutters, noticing the same thing.

"Yeah." I rub the spot between my brows where the tension always builds first. "I need to pee."

She nods, and I stand, careful not to let my legs wobble. I walk to the bathroom, chin up, refusing to give any of them the satisfaction.

Inside, I pace, patting my face with water without ruining my makeup, just trying to cool down.

Like I feared, I get followed even to the bathroom. A beautiful woman walks in, blonde, the kind of figure I've always been a little jealous of, and leans against the wall, just staring at me.

Then she opens her mouth, and all that beauty goes right out the window.

"That ring was supposed to be mine."

There's so much bitterness in her voice it almost feels sticky on my skin.

I lean against the wall across from her. "I'd bring that up with him, not with me."

She laughs. "You want me to look desperate in front of him? So he thinks you're the calm one who doesn't cause drama?"

I laugh, too. Hard enough that she looks confused, then disgusted, when I snort.

"I cause him more headaches than you'll ever know. So no. And I really don't care how he sees you, either. Sorry."

"You think you're special?" she sneers.

"I don't." I shrug. "He, however, does."

She steps closer, until our heels almost touch.

"Did you know he and my father sat down to discuss a marriage between us? Yes. Marriage. There was even a contract drafted up." Her eyes spark, waiting for me to fall apart.

I run the timeline in my head. How long ago was this?

"You didn't know, did you—that he bought me a ring, too?" She smirks.

He bought her a ring, too. Meanwhile, he loses his mind if I so much as glance at another man.

Why couldn't he have just married her and gotten it over with? Left us both out of the misery.

"Then why is his ring on my finger and the only thing you have of him is the memory and a couple of stories?" I ask, closing that last step.

She flinches, but tries to hide it.

"For next time, don't bring this to me. Go ask him yourself. Don't hide in a bathroom trying to use me to get to him. Say it to his face. You clearly weren't strangers if there was a contract."

"There's no need for that." She whispers it. "He'll realize eventually how unfit you are to stand next to him. He'll come back on his own."

It's been three years, bitter woman. He hasn't come back yet.

I nod. "Fair. Guess we'll see. But if I were you, I wouldn't hold my breath."

She scoffs, mutters something under her breath. She turns to leave, but stops at the door and looks back at me, smiling.

"Well," she says, "he's meeting with my father again tonight. Small world. I'll be sure to stop by and say hi. Maybe I'll even take your advice."

The door shuts behind her before I can say anything back.

She's dying for that ring and that man. I'm dying to get away from both.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Amara

This has got to be one of the shittiest days in the history of human recorded days.

I know that's wildly inaccurate. Wars, famines, plagues, actual historical suffering. But if you ask me, my day is at least in the running for a top ten spot.

No, Amara. That's tone-deaf. Shut up.

My phone pings again.

The woman I met at the gala two nights ago somehow got my number, and she has not stopped texting me since.

The first one was a photo of a diamond ring on her finger, light catching it in a dozen little flashes.

This was mine. Yours is nicer, sure. But I'll always be the first woman he bought a ring for.

Ping.

A photo of her manicured hand wrapped around a tattooed forearm. I recognize the ink immediately. Matteo's.

Took your advice. Worked out perfectly! Thank you.

Ping.

Then, of course, a photo of her lying in bed, clearly naked, arm thrown over her eyes, a small satisfied smile, her neck and chest covered in hickeys.

Don't mind him, love. He needed to release some stress and couldn't find better than me. Prudes don't do well in bed, unfortunately.

Ping.

A photo of her nails dragging across the V of some man's hips. Has to be him. It's obscene. And under the blanket, he's clearly hard.

Ping.

Two coffee mugs, both rimmed in her lipstick.

Want to join us? You'd have to learn to control the jealousy though. This is normal for men like him, you know that. One woman is never enough for someone that powerful. You get to be the good little fiancée in public. I get him every night. Perfect arrangement, really.

Ping.

Ping.

Ping.

Okay. I get it. I really do.

Am I furious? Yes. Because that man hasn't let me so much as make eye contact with another man since he decided to ruin my life, and meanwhile he's apparently out there with anyone who'll have him. I never actually knew before today whether he was messing around with other women. He did a great job at keeping it under wraps, I'll give him that. But he clearly picked the wrong woman to be sloppy with, because she is unhinged.

Ping.

I swear to God. I get it.

I can't bite my tongue anymore. I type out one message.

Thank God most women aren't like her. Girls like this give the rest of us a bad name.

Careful. You're starting to seem desperate. And that's not going to make me feel anything but pity for you, if that's what you were going for.

And then, because I'm an impulsive idiot, I send a photo back, too.

I know falling into her trap is easy. I fall anyway, but I'm going to make it count. I dig up a photo I took this morning and talked myself out of sending at the time—every single ring he's ever bought me. I'd slid one onto each finger for the picture, ran out of fingers before I ran out of rings, laid the rest across my stomach, propped the phone up, and flipped off the camera with both hands.

A ring for every time I said no. Would you look at that? Turns out you're both obsessed with me.

Sue me. I couldn't help it.

My eyes roll back as the phone explodes with pings, her clearly losing it on the other end, and I have zero interest in reading a single one. I power it off, shove it in my bag, and pick up my pace toward the studio.

Where, apparently, my shitty day was just getting warmed up.

Instructor Amy is sitting on the floor when I walk in, head in her hands.

"What's wrong?" I drop my bag and kneel down next to her.

Almost every girl who trains here is in the room, and at least half of them are crying.

Amy doesn't answer. I look around at the others instead.

"They raised the rent on Amy," one of the girls says. "She's going to have to shut the studio down."

My face falls apart. I sit next to Amy, mirroring her, back against the wall.

"What? Why?"

"They said the area's getting more popular. More offers coming in than ever before."

"How much are they asking?"

"Thirty thousand."

"HUH?" It comes out as a scream before I clamp a hand over my own mouth.

Thirty thousand. I do the math instantly, the way I always do now—that's nothing to him. He'd hand that over without blinking if I asked.

I don't know if I can.

"Have you talked to the landlord? Asked for time to find another studio, or for him to be reasonable, anything?" I ask.

Amy finally lifts her head, eyes red-rimmed. "I tried. He said why would he do that when he's got a check waiting."

I shake my head.

"Amara." She says my name gently. "I've been trying for two years to keep this place standing. I think it's finally time to admit defeat."

"I wish I could just—" I stop myself before I say something stupid. My father is in debt, and I forget that all the time.

"Don't," Amy says, reading my face anyway. "I need to figure this out for myself."

One of the younger girls, Priya, wipes her face with her sleeve. "Where are we even supposed to go? This is the only place some of us have that doesn't feel like—" She doesn't finish the sentence, but everyone in this room already knows exactly what she means.

This is our safe place.

"We'll figure something out," I say. We'll find another place, even if it's a bit further than this one. We would all make the sacrifice.

I stare at the water-stained ceiling tile we've been staring at for years, wondering how long it would take us to find another studio.

"Thirty thousand dollars," Amy finally says again. "For this dump."

I look at the mismatched mirrors we bought secondhand off a different studio that closed before us.

"This dump," I repeat.

Amy looks up from her hands, her brows raised, and we both explode into laughter at the same time.

I don't know how long we laugh. There's nothing remotely funny about any of it. The other girls join in awkwardly a second later, glancing at each other sideways.

That only makes Amy and me laugh harder.

What are we going to do?

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Amara

Maybe I should take advantage of the billionaire currently obsessed with me.

Even though I'm still furious with him for being so possessive over me while he's probably got a rotating cast of women, one of whom won't stop harassing my phone.

The audacity of that woman is genuinely insane.

I shake my head, trying to shove the whole thing out of my mind. As if my thoughts summoned him out of thin air, he's leaning against his car outside the studio, cigarette between his fingers, watching the door like he's been standing there for a while.

The anger I tried to bury an hour ago comes right back up. *Don't you dare touch another man*. He said that. *You're mine*.

He said that, too.

My butt, I am.

So I'm the only one on lockdown while he gets to sleep with whoever he wants? That's rich.

And it's not jealousy! It's the principle.

"Why are you here?" I keep my face as flat as I can manage.

"I was in the area." He shrugs.

"Hmm." I press my lips together and don't dignify that with anything else.

When I get close enough, I fling the cigarette from his mouth.

“You have an addiction,” I mutter.

He raises a brow. “Worried about me, my love?”

“Not at all,” I grind out.

One second I'm several feet away from him. The next, he's got me pulled into his chest and his mouth is on mine.

The kiss tastes like obsession, whiskey, and cigarette smoke, and it's a heady combination; it goes straight to my head before I can stop it.

It's nothing like any kiss I've had before this—including Adrien, who's fading a little more each week under the stress of everything else going on, though the principle of what I lost never fades with him. I still deserve to choose who I marry. Who I kiss. Who I let anywhere near me.

Matteo's thumb drags slow over my ring finger, right over the ring I only wear to keep him off my back, and I swear I feel him groan against my mouth just from that small contact.

I don't want more trouble.

He makes that impossible, too.

I don't pull away from the kiss, which annoys me to no end. My feelings on him haven't changed—I still can't stand this man—and I don't pull back, but I definitely don't kiss him back either, not even when his tongue tries coaxing mine.

My whole body shivers anyway, traitor that it is, and he finally breaks away, one hand coming up to cradle my cheek.

"I lied," he says.

"About what?"

"I wasn't in the area. I just missed you."

That man has a gift for saying things that'd make any woman swoon. Fortunately, he's also a suffocating, controlling prick, so there's no swooning happening for me.

But I have to think of Amy, who pulled me out of some of the darkest weeks of my life. I have to think of the studio, the only real refuge I've had in years, and every other girl who needs it just as badly as I do.

So I ask him for the first real favor I've ever asked him for.

"Can I ask you something?"

His eyes go wide, fast. Something close to a flush crosses his face. "Anything. The moon? Stars, if you want them."

I bite back the urge to roll my eyes. "More like—help finding a new studio. The landlord's raising the rent to something insane. Amy can't cover it."

I could just ask him to pay off the current landlord directly; he wouldn't even feel it. That man doesn't deserve a cent. If Matteo's going to spend anything, I'd rather it go toward starting over clean, somewhere that greedy landlord never sees a dime of.

"When do you need it?" he asks, not a single question about why, or how much.

If he were actually my fiancé—someone I'd chosen myself—this would be the single hottest thing a man's ever said to me. Instead, it's just another reminder that every good thing about him comes with the fact that he wants to own me.

"End of the week?" I wince at my own timeline. It's almost impossible to find an opening on such short notice in the city, especially considering that there has been a shortage of business spots for rent.

"Done."

"Done? Just like that?"

He smirks. "One condition."

I knew it. It's never actually this easy with him. It's never once been this easy.

"What's the condition?" I brace myself for whatever's coming.

"A date."

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Amara

In life, you have to do things for the greater good. That's exactly how I end up on a date with the one and only psychopath, my tormentor, the man I hate most in this world.

I keep my thoughts on Amy. On the girls who need that studio more than I need my own pride tonight. On the fact that it's a refuge for every broken, tattered person who walks through those doors, myself included. I hold onto that the entire drive here, and I keep holding onto it now.

"Open your mouth, my love." He holds a fork of something that looks like salmon up to my face. "Their specialty."

This is the one night I can't afford to fight him on everything.

One measly date. For the greater good.

When was the last time I actually did something selfless like this?

I open my mouth, and I watch something in his eyes go soft while I chew. It practically dissolves on my tongue, and I have to stop myself from making a sound.

This might be the best meal I've ever had in my life, and given the literal gold leaf on every plate, it's probably worth more than I want to know. Of course, because subtlety has never once been his language, he's rented out the entire restaurant. We're the only two people in a room built for two hundred.

I reach for the wine, taking a slow sip while I watch the skyline turn gold with the sunset.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" His voice is suddenly right next to my ear. When did he get that close? His thumb slides the fallen strap of my dress back up my shoulder, lingering longer than the task requires.

Damn him.

He's really committing to the seduction routine tonight. No wonder he's got women lining up to embarrass themselves for his attention. I shift my arm just enough to knock his hand off my shoulder and take another sip instead.

"My beautiful fiancée." He says it like he's tasting the word. "There's no need to drink your way through one date with me. It's our first. I want you to actually remember it. See how well we get along?" He takes the glass out of my hand and sets it down out of reach.

I nod, dripping with sarcasm. This man is delusional.

"We don't get along. Hint, hint—if you have to blackmail me into a date, we're probably not compatible. Are we?" I flash him a smile so wide and so fake it actually hurts my cheeks, then reach past him, retrieve the glass, and finish it in one go just to watch his jaw tick.

His brow lifts. He's handsome, rich, and powerful—the trifecta some women spend their whole lives chasing. What does he want from me? He could have anyone. He's clearly already having several anyones, if his texting stalker is any indication.

"Even in another life?" He tilts his head in that intimidating way of his.

The message underneath it is clear. All you get is me. Till death. And even after that, he'll find me anyway. If I won't love him in this life, apparently he's decided I'll love him in the next one.

He's insane like that.

I cross my arms. "In another life, you're a dog and I'm a cat. Even then, we still don't get along."

Childish. I know.

He laughs, and I stare at him like he's grown a second head.

"I love your sense of humor, my love." He leans in, cradling my face in both hands. "Give your future husband a kiss."

My eyebrows climb straight into my hairline.

I get it now. Every single time I "defy" him, there's a punishment. And he's not nearly as strategic as I gave him credit for—if the plan is conditioning me to crave him, pairing his touch with punishment is the exact wrong lesson to teach a person.

"Don't be ridiculous." I try to twist out of his grip.

He plants his mouth on my cheek instead. The corner of my lips. The bridge of my nose.

I won't pretend there's zero physical attraction here—he's objectively not a bad-looking man, and I've been starved of any contact at all for years because of him specifically. I'm also, unfortunately, a curious person who's never gone further than kissing in her entire life.

But that's the difference between the two of us. My head is bigger than my body's impulses, and my head has already made its decision about him.

He starts trailing wet kisses down the side of my neck, further than anything he's attempted before, and my skin—traitor that it is—actually wants more of it. My mind stays louder than the wanting.

"Stop it." I grab his collar, try to shake some sense back into him. "I mean it."

He ignores the struggle entirely, nose dragging from my collarbone up to the hollow of my throat, breathing me in, eyes shut, an expression on his face I can only describe as pure bliss.

His mouth finds the shell of my ear next, teeth grazing the back of it.

"I'm obsessed with you," he breathes.

I roll my eyes even though he can't see them. "I know. I really wish you weren't."

"Impossible." He bites down gently on my earlobe.

Kiss after kiss lands, each one leaving a small burn behind, and I grip his collar harder, shaking him again.

"I. Don't. Want. You." I make each word land separately.

"You lie beautifully," he growls against my skin, "but your body's never once learned to." His thumb finds the swell of my chest through the fabric, circling slow over one hardened peak.

I bite down on my own tongue. "It's a biological reaction. I'd have it with anyone touching me like that. My mind doesn't want you. Neither does whatever's left of my heart."

Something sparks behind his eyes, and his thumb finally stills. "Really."

"Really." I hold his gaze, daring him to push it further.

"Did you have that same reaction to him?" He snarls. "Did you let Adrien touch what's mine more than I saw, that day under the rain?"

The expression on his face isn't human anymore. It's something closer to an animal.

I laugh, finally managing to knock both his hands off me entirely. Convincing my own body that he's the enemy is proving harder than I

expected, but I manage it, mostly out of spite.

I shrug. He doesn't get to ask me that question—not while he's got a woman across town sending me photos of hickeys he left on her.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" The words are already leaving my mouth before my brain catches up. "Maybe I'm carrying his child right now."

I regret it the instant I say it. I watch his expression change, and I feel my own face drain of color to match.

I swear I watch seven different demons cross behind his eyes, each one darker than the last.

Why can I never, ever just shut my mouth?

He flicks two fingers toward the waiter, who covers ten feet of floor in what looks like one stride.

"Sir?" The man doesn't lift his eyes off his shoes.

"Remove every drop of alcohol from this table." His eyes are somewhere else entirely—galaxies away.

I broke him.

Thousands of dollars in wine and champagne vanish inside a minute, and then it's just us again. I can't get a full breath in from how suffocating the place has turned. His anger has sucked all the oxygen out of the room.

His body's still sitting across from me, but his mind is somewhere else. Possibly in hell.

"Russo?" I try, careful.

His eyes come back to me, and they burn on contact.

"Why would you drink, knowing you might be carrying my child?" His voice cracks like a whip. "You could have hurt it. Hurt them."

Wait.

Our child?

He'd genuinely raise another man's baby just to keep me.

His hand moves to my stomach, resting there, squeezing with a gentleness that isn't reflected on his face.

"You'd better not have hurt my child, Amara. That was reckless. Careless. I'm having my medical team examine you the second we're done here."

I search his eyes frantically.

"You're that desperate to keep me that you'd raise another man's baby as your own?" I ask, unable to stop myself even now.

He roars and his arm sweeps the entire table clear. I gasp, chest heaving, my whole body gone rigid.

What have I done?

How do I walk this back from here?

"Adrien is a dead man," he snarls. "And any child you carry is mine. Mine. Do you understand me? Anything with your blood in it belongs to me."

I lick my lips, cursing myself silently. My own stupid lie just put Adrien's life in danger again.

"I was lying," I whisper.

"I would love to believe that." His voice has gone eerily even. "But I don't. And we can't exactly let you keep him around as a way to unravel me whenever you feel like it. He has to go."

I stand on shaking legs, willing to do anything right now. Anything at all to undo this.

I close the space between us until we're sharing breath.

"I swear to you, I lied. I just wanted to feel like I had control tonight, so I said what I knew would piss you off. Nothing happened beyond the one kiss you already saw. That's the truth."

Whatever's burning behind his eyes doesn't go out. Not even a little.

"Prove it."

“Or what?” I dare ask.

“Adrien goes *bye-bye*.”

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Amara

Sacrifices I have to make of my own doing—if I hadn't opened my big mouth… I wouldn't be humiliating myself like this.

But I have to clean up the mess I made. I did this. I have to sacrifice to fix it. And I need to be a hell of a lot more mindful of what comes out of my mouth next time. I can't afford to be this stupid again.

Climbing onto the table that's now swept clean, I lie flat on my back. I look nervously around the room, doing everything I can to avoid his eyes.

"OUT!" he roars at any staff hiding in plain sight to ensure fast service. Three waiters scurry away into the shadows.

There's a security camera directly above our table, but it's turned off. It's a standard condition when people from the underworld come to dine—and the owners are compensated handsomely for their compliance. Still, I flinch when a bullet shatters right through the lens. My hand flies to cover my mouth as I gasp, staring at him with wide, terrified eyes.

"Can't risk it," he mutters, though his gaze still feels a million miles away, lost in his own head.

With a heavy gulp, I spread my legs and gather the fabric of my dress up to my waist. I have to do this. For Adrien's life. To make amends for my sins.

My plain black panties are right in front of his face now. He doesn't move at first, but his focus slowly shifts back from whatever hell he's been drowning in. I force my legs to stay open.

"No one touched this but my own hand," I whisper, fighting down the suffocating shame. I deserve this for running my mouth.

"I'm not sure I believe you," he mutters.

My fingers shake as I pull the fabric to the side, exposing what no one has ever seen before. I don't think I've even looked at myself that closely.

I drop my hands to my sides, my nails digging into my palms as the heat of embarrassment rushes through me. I don't think I'm particularly pretty down there. I'm sure I missed spots shaving; it probably looks awkward, and maybe that woman who keeps texting him looks better.

Maybe this isn't so bad. He can look at me, enjoy his brief moment of victory and my surrender, and then go back to her and leave me alone once he realizes I don't have gold between my legs. If I hadn't run my mouth, I could have left here with my dignity intact. Tears prick the backs of my eyes, but I force them down. No tears.

A slow kiss lands on my right ankle, then my left. On my left knee, then my right.

"Why are you blushing, my love?" he hums, his presence sharpening, fully back in the room. "You know there's no embarrassment between us."

I shake my head, staring up at the chandeliers overhead instead. A punishing pinch to my inner thigh jolts me back to reality.

"Look. At. Me," he growls.

I look… and he looks dangerous. Drunk, high, or unhinged.

Did I do that to him?

"Do you seriously not know how pretty you are right here?"

His thumb traces me, dragging from where my ass peeks out all the way to the top of my mound. I gasp at the sensation, my body trying to jerk backward. I'm not used to anything touching my folds; even when I masturbate, I only ever touch my clit.

"Sensitive?" he asks softly.

I nod automatically.

"Words," he commands.

My mouth opens, then closes. Opens again, then closes. Finally, I force it out. "Yes."

"Did. He. Touch. Here?"

"No! I swear it. Only my hand," I rush to say, desperate for this to be over.

"Show me."

"What?" I gasp, still fighting the urge to look away.

"I think what I said was very clear, pretty girl. Show me."

Do this for the innocent life you put in danger. Do this to make up for your sins.

Closing my eyes so tight I see white sparks, I bring my index fingers to my clit, rubbing just like I would under the safety of my covers. But because masturbation has always been mental for me, doing it like this under this stress does nothing for me.

"Is this what you do under the sheets, my love?" he hums.

"Yes," I sigh, my voice strained.

"My poor baby… you've been so unsatisfied for so long and didn't tell me? I could have fixed it. Made you feel so good if you'd just given me the chance," he coos softly, mocking sympathy—and God help me, I've always had a weakness for that tone.

I'm starting to get hotter. Which I shouldn't. He's the enemy. I rub faster, trying to force an orgasm just so this can end.

"Are you sure he didn't touch what's mine? No one did?" he taunts, his own thumb joining in, slipping lower to stroke my labia while I work my clit.

My hips jerk instinctively, but he heavy-handedly pins an arm across my waist, locking me in place.

"I'm sure," I breathlessly promise.

I force myself to yield to his touch, feeling his fingers slicking themselves in my own wetness and dragging it all over me. My teeth are clenched at first as I fight the sensory overload, but after a few breathless seconds, my jaw slackens and I melt.

"Good girl," he hums, pressing a warm kiss against my inner thigh.

My eyes roll back. Voices have always been my absolute undoing. I love deep, manly voices.

"Oh yeah, baby, I can feel you getting close. You have the prettiest pussy… how lucky am I that it's all mine?"

In the end, despite all my shame, it's his voice that pushes me over the edge. As my orgasm crashes over me, it's harder and more intense than anything I've ever felt.

Before I can recover, a sharp pulse of discomfort prickles through me as two of his fingers push deep inside.

"Watch," he commands.

I shake my head, still trying to catch my breath and process the sudden stretch.

"I told you to fucking watch as I stretch you for the first time."

With a trembling sob, I push myself up on my elbows to look down. The sight is overwhelming. I've rarely ever fingered myself—I was always too scared. It's embarrassing to admit being afraid of your own anatomy, but I was always terrified of doing something wrong or hurting myself.

He works his fingers inside me, using his thumb to trap my sensitive clit and press down hard with every push.

Unconscious moans tear from my throat; I can't stop them if I tried.

"Feels so good," I whine, completely helpless to it.

"I know, my love. But only with me. Always only with me."

I break completely, my body gripping onto his fingers as a second crest washes over me. I sink back onto the table, exhausted. He leans down, pressing soft, possessive kisses to my cheek, my lips, my neck.

"Baby, don't fall asleep yet. I have to show you something."

It takes everything in me to force my heavy eyes open. He brings his glistening fingers right to my face—slicked with my arousal and a faint trace of blood—and holds my gaze as he licks and sucks them clean, letting out a low moan.

Oh my God. This is too filthy.

He sucks them until there's nothing left. "I believe you. You kept this beautiful pussy only for me, baby. I'm so lucky to have the most gorgeous thing on the planet as mine… and you won't be touching it again without me. Or letting anyone else near it."

Wait… what?

This was supposed to be a one-time punishment. But I'm far too exhausted to argue. When he wraps his jacket around me and cradles me against his chest, I don't remember much else as my eyes drift shut.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Matteo

She woke up in my bed and couldn't wait to get out of it.

It pisses me off. Everything about her these days pisses me off, and somehow I still can't stop chasing after her.

When she told me she might be carrying that man's child, I blacked out. That's the only way to describe it—black, with the occasional streak of red bleeding through. It was a long time till I came to myself, and it was only when she flashed me her virgin little pussy.

I can't believe that she's insecure about it; I don't even remember any other pussy before hers. All I know is hers, and it's perfection. Beautiful. My temple and place of worship.

However, I can't lie and say that I'm not disappointed that her first sexual experience happened with me in a jealous rage.

I wanted to give her flowers, candles, and soft music… the type of shit she deserves. But I can't ever regret anything with her.

Because she's let me touch her…

Let me close enough to see my religion between her legs, to stretch her hymen on my fingers and lick the aftermath of it. My perfect woman.

Mine only.

I'm the only one who gets to touch her, and she's the only one who gets to touch me.

Since the first moment I saw her, all my interest in other women went out the window.

All my dick wants is her.

She's the star of all of my jerk-off sessions.

And she will never, ever be anyone but mine.

Don't get me the fuck wrong, if she hadn't been lying about that baby shit… that Adrien bastard wouldn't have seen another day.

My phone rings, dragging me out of a train of thought that was turning murderous. His wedding's scheduled for a few days from now. It would

have been a funeral instead, and I'd have raised whatever child she was carrying as my own regardless, because anything with her blood in it belongs to me by default.

I check the screen. Richard. One of the better property developers in New York, and months before I ever saw Amara through that window, we'd been drafting up a marriage of convenience between his daughter and me. Loveless business arrangements are standard in our world—nobody expects romance, just alignment of assets. But his daughter wanted romance anyway, and I couldn't stand two consecutive hours in a room with her, let alone a lifetime.

I broke it off before either of us signed anything. Richard didn't take it personally—we still run joint ventures to this day. His daughter, however, blew up my phone so much that I eventually blocked the number.

I answer. "Yes, Richard."

"Matteo!" A woman's voice cuts through immediately.

My brows draw together. "Who is this?"

"WHO IS THIS?" The pitch climbs another octave.

Nobody screams at me and lives to repeat the experience. Nobody except Amara.

"If you don't lower your voice and remember how to address me, I'll have your tongue delivered to Richard in a box," I hiss.

"It's Bianca. How could you forget me? I was going to be your wife," she sobs.

Good God.

"We met twice, Bianca. Skip the theatrics. Is there a reason for this call, or should I hang up now?"

A swallow comes through the line, then the sound of her sitting down somewhere. "There is, actually. I'd have called from my own number, but for some reason none of my calls seem to reach you."

"Does Richard know you're calling me?" I already know the answer before she gives it. Richard doesn't let anything, dramatic daughter included, interfere with business.

"This is about Amara," she says, saying it fast, sidestepping my question.

That gets my full attention immediately.

"What about her?"

There's a pause, more rustling. "I messed up. It slipped out that we—that there was an arrangement, once. That we were supposed to get married. And she's been terrorizing me ever since."

Terrorizing.

My skin prickles. She told my girl about an old arrangement, made her doubt something she has absolutely no reason to doubt—

Wait.

Terrorizing.

"Terrorizing," I repeat, testing the word.

Did she get jealous? Over me?

Something close to euphoria floods straight through the anger sitting in my chest. Some deeply buried, half-feral part of me is thrilled at the idea that some piece of her already understands exactly who I belong to, whether she's ready to admit it or not. The other part of me is furious that anyone made her question it in the first place.

Bianca is nothing.

Amara is everything.

"Yes." Bianca's voice climbs again, indignant. "She's been texting me, mocking me, called me pathetic, sent a photo of herself flipping me off—both hands, actually—and today I saw her at the mall, and she didn't even say hi. Just glared. I need you to make her stop. She's completely overreacting."

"She did what?" My heart's beating out of my chest.

She's jealous. Over something she has zero reason to be jealous over, because every part of me already belongs entirely to her.

I want to belong to her.

I cut Bianca off mid-sentence. "Send me the photo."

A second later, my phone buzzes.

"Are you actually going to do something about this?" she whines.

"I know you aren't innocent in this, Bianca. What I'll do is send pieces of you to your father if you don't leave my fiancée alone. There's no way that information slipped out by accident."

"But—"

"Are we clear?"

A sniffle. "Clear."

"Good."

"Mr. Russo." Small, tentative.

"What? Make it quick."

"Please don't mention this to my father."

I make no promises. It depends entirely on what else she said to my girl before I hang up and pull up the photo she sent.

I have to bite down on my own knuckle to keep from laughing.

My future wife, glasses pushed up her nose, sitting cross-legged on her bed with a puddle of every ring I ever bought and she ever rejected spread across her stomach—because she ran out of fingers to put them on—both middle fingers raised at the camera, dead center of the frame.

I zoom in on her hands, both middle fingers flipped skyward, defiant down to the last knuckle.

God, she's insufferable. God, I'm completely gone for her.

I set it as my lock screen.

My girl is *jealous* over *me*.

I can't wait to see her face when I bring this up. I want to see what jealousy looks like on her face, and then I want to talk her all the way down from it—reminding her that there has never once been anyone else, and there never will be.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Amara

"What now? What more do you want? My soul? My last breath?" I groan the second I step out of the studio and find him already in my face.

Ever since what happened between us, I've been actively avoiding him. It's embarrassing, and I brought it entirely on myself.

Whatever's between us now is more tangled than before. When bodies get involved, logic packs its bags and leaves the building. Him being my first to explore with isn't helping the situation settle any easier.

It feels like he's slowly consuming every corner of my life.

He takes my bag off my shoulder before I can argue, pressing a kiss to my temple. I flinch away and glare at him instead.

Something devilish crosses his face, and when he leans in close to my ear, I already know whatever comes next won't be good.

"I can still smell you on my fingers." His voice drops low. "It's making my mouth water."

There it is.

"You're a billionaire. Invest in decent soap," I grumble, sliding into the car when he opens the door for me. I'm not about to make a scene right outside the studio doors.

"*We're* billionaires, my beautiful fiancée," he says.

I roll my eyes and watch him circle to the driver's seat.

"What are you doing here, exactly? Is this becoming a regular thing? Chauffeuring me around instead of running your criminal empire?"

He laughs. I wasn't joking.

"We had a deal, remember?" He reaches past me for his sunglasses in the compartment above my knees, forearm brushing my thigh on the way, and I have to stop myself from reacting to it.

I need distance from this man. The fact that he's made sure no one else has ever touched me is currently rewiring my body into thinking he's the

only source of releasing sexual frustration, and I hate it. Associating him with pleasure I'd never felt before him.

Because of him.

It's an ugly, closed loop, and I refuse to be trapped inside it.

I clear my throat, watching him settle the sunglasses onto his face. I try to remind my own body who exactly he is. This is the same man who's run our lives for three years. Controlled every choice. Still controlling them.

Get it together, body.

"We're going to look at studios?" My voice comes out rough.

"Yes. I found one I think works well. I want your approval before anything's finalized." He flexes one hand against the wheel.

I nod.

"That was fast. How? Amy searched and couldn't find a single opening anywhere in the city."

He glances over, almost amused I'd ask. "I have my ways, my love."

I shake my head. "I'm not your love."

"Hmm." He tilts his head, studying me through the corner of his eyes. "You seem more irritated than usual. Something you'd like to tell me?"

What's going on with him? Why does he look so unbearably pleased with himself right now?

"Nothing new. I still can't stand you, and seeing you doesn't exactly brighten my morning," I bite out.

"That's harsh, baby. I won't take it personally, though—I'm fairly confident if I put my hand down your pants right now, I'd get a very different answer out of you. Wouldn't I?"

"Russo!" I snap.

"Matteo," he corrects. "You were screaming that name. Shouldn't be this difficult to remember now."

"Get off my back!" My whole face goes hot.

"Why so wound up, my love? Does this have anything to do with Bianca?" he asks.

"Who's Bianca?" I shout.

"The woman you sent that lovely photo to. If memory serves, it involved both middle fingers and millions of dollars in rejected rings."

My face drains of color instantly. I regret that photo more with every passing second. And the fury that runs through me at the confirmation that

he's actually been in contact with her—talking to her, texting her, whatever this is—is scary. I shove the feeling down before it can show on my face.

"She deserved it."

His smile stretches wide enough to show every straight white tooth he owns. "I have absolutely no doubt."

I press my lips together hard to keep from calling him a hypocrite—the audacity of a man who loses his mind if I glance at another man for half a second, while apparently maintaining his own personal harem, Bianca included.

"Tell your girl to stop texting me." I sigh, staring out the window instead of at him. "Whatever's between the two of you, fix it yourselves. Leave me out of it."

"She isn't my girl," he growls.

"I don't care who she is to you. Just get her to leave me alone." I pull out my phone, pretending to text Mia.

"The fuck do you mean, you don't care?" He turns fully toward me now, genuinely thrown.

I almost laugh at the look on his face.

"What, were you expecting tears? A screaming match, because you might be seeing other women? Russo, we're not even together. I don't belong to you. You don't belong to me."

His face goes red in stages, like watching a kettle come to boil. I swear I can actually see him vibrating with the effort of holding himself back.

"In what universe do we not belong to each other?" His voice drops so quiet it's scary.

"Reality. The one outside your head. We only belong to each other in whatever fantasy you've built for yourself. It's time to wake up and let me go. Go be with Bianca, or Britney, or whoever the hell her name is."

The car jerks to a stop hard enough that I lurch forward against the seatbelt, only just missing the dash. We've pulled up outside a building complex—I'm guessing this is the studio.

"Don't ever say that again."

"Say what?" I turn on him, still furious.

"That we don't belong together." His hand comes off the wheel, gripping it a second later. "We do. I belong to you. You have every right to be angry—but Bianca is nothing. I sat across from her exactly twice in my life. Yes, there was a contract being drafted. I pulled out of it myself,

because I couldn't stand two hours in a room with her, let alone a lifetime. I've already warned her once to stop using it to get under your skin."

My heart picks up despite myself.

"That contract existed before I ever saw you dancing through that window. From the second I saw you, there hasn't been a single other woman."

Something in my chest loosens without my permission, and I unclasp the seatbelt just to have something to do with my hands.

"You don't owe me an explanation. I don't care either way."

That's a partial lie. Whatever was coiled tight in my stomach for the last hour has eased, and I hate how obvious that probably is on my face.

He reaches over, cupping my jaw with one hand, thumb pressing hard enough that my lips purse on their own.

"It's okay to admit you were jealous."

"I wasn't," I rush to say.

Something smug settles into his expression.

"Yes, you were."

He unclasps his own belt and rounds the car to open my door before I can argue further.

What is this man, and how exactly am I supposed to prove to either of us that I wasn't jealous?

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Matteo

"You have guests," Lorenzo says.

My brows draw together, and I stub the cigarette out in what's left of my whiskey.

"Guests." The words are foreign in my own mouth. "I don't have guests, Lorenzo."

"They say they're from Amara." His face pinches.

That changes everything instantly. I don't usually have guests. Anything with her name attached to it, though, gets through every door I own without question.

Amara, who still insists she wasn't jealous, despite it being clear as day. Which is entirely her right to feel—if some man so much as whispered about marrying her, I'd have him gutted before the ink dried on any contract.

She gave me nothing but ice the entire walkthrough of the new studio, one that I made sure was the single best space available in this city. She loved it. I watched her face light up walking through it—and all I got in return was a clipped thank you. I expected her to kiss me.

God, I want that. I crave it like it's a hunger that needs to be fulfilled.

I hate that she's still denying what's true. There is nothing I own, breathe, or exist as that isn't already hers. I. Am. Hers. She needs to accept that before I lose what little restraint I have left.

"Send them up," I tell Lorenzo.

He doesn't move right away. Instead, he studies me with an expression I don't like. "You need to get a handle on yourself. Every time she plays a game with you, you lose your mind a little more. Stop reacting."

I wave him off, already impatient. What is she planning? What game is this?

I shut the office door behind me and head down to the main living room, and I stop dead in the doorway.

Not one girl on my couch. Not two. Not even four.

Six.

All of them in lingerie, faces done up heavy with makeup, smiles so wide it's like straight out of a set of a horror movie.

"What the fuck," I hiss.

One of them—older, late thirties maybe, moves toward me with a sway to her hips. Her perfume hits me before she's within three feet and it makes me nauseous.

Nothing like Amara.

Nothing on this earth is like Amara.

The woman reaches out, fingers brushing the knot of my tie, and it feels like she's tainting territory that only ever belonged to Amara.

"We were told you were pent up, sir." Her voice drops into something meant to sound inviting. It does the opposite entirely—I feel my dick shrivel. "We can help with that."

She presses her mouth to my cheek before I can step back, leaving a smear of lipstick behind, and I shove her away hard enough that she stumbles backward onto the couch, landing in a startled heap.

She whimpers. The girl beside her scrambles to check on her, both of them staring at me with wide eyes.

I don't put my hands on women. But anyone who thinks they get to touch what belongs to Amara, invited or not, has a death wish.

Murder is always on my mind at the mere thought of anyone else's hands on her, anywhere, ever—and meanwhile she apparently doesn't care one bit if I go through half this country.

Jealousy is biological. Instinctive. A rule written into every creature that's ever claimed something as its own. If she isn't jealous over me, that means some part of her still hasn't accepted that I belong to her the way she belongs to me.

That thought alone makes my hands shake.

"W-were we sent to the wrong address?" one of them mutters, eyes fixed on the floor.

"Stay," I bite out.

Fighting the urge to lash out at any of them—not their fault, they're just pawns in Amara's games—I drag a chair over, spin it, and straddle it backward.

I pull out my phone and FaceTime her. First time I've ever done that. I don't know if she'll answer, or if I'll have to hunt her down across the city.

She picks up on the second ring, face lit with glee. She planned this entire thing and she's proud of it.

Her hair's pulled up messy, no makeup, bleach stains soaked into the collar of an old shirt. Helping clean the new studio, apparently, which I don't love—all she had to do was ask and I'd have sent a full crew to handle it in an afternoon.

Without a word, I flip the camera to show her exactly what's sitting in my living room.

She laughs.

If I ever caught sight of a man shirtless within ten feet of her, I would lose every ounce of composure I own. She looks at six half-dressed women in my house and laughs.

The blonde one waves at the camera, winking.

My left eye starts twitching. I can feel my back teeth grinding down to powder.

"I see you got my gift, Russo." Her grin stretches wide.

"Why."

She steps out of the studio into the little garden out back, sunlight catching the satisfaction all over her face.

"Well, you wouldn't stop insisting I was jealous over you. Couldn't have that reputation following me around, could we? Wouldn't want the great Matteo Russo thinking I want to tie him down. Enjoy the gift."

I tilt the phone to show her the lipstick mark still sitting on my cheek. Every part of me feels disgust looking at it, but I need her to see it, too.

"So you wouldn't mind if I actually enjoyed your generous little gift right now? Want me to keep you on the line while I do?" My voice comes out mocking.

Her eyes spark, jaw tightening, and I have to fight down a smirk. Lie to yourself all you want, baby. I know exactly what's under that.

"That's the reason they're there," she scoffs. "For your enjoyment. Have fun. I have zero interest in watching." The screen goes dark.

She's jealous. She has to be. I refuse to accept any reality where she isn't.

The girls are still perched on my couch, hands fidgeting in their laps.

"Apologies for the inconvenience. You can go," I mutter.

The one I pushed back bristles. "What? Why?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Because I said so."

She swallows hard. The others rise immediately, filing toward the door. She doesn't move.

"On your way out, find the bald guard by the front gate. He'll settle you up for the trouble."

They nod, hurrying past her toward the exit.

She stays seated.

She reaches back and unclasps her bra, shedding what little clothing she has left with every step she takes toward me.

"I don't want cash." Her lashes flutter. "I want the two of us to enjoy this. I can make you feel so fucking good."

If she thinks there's a single thing appetizing about this to me, she's badly mistaken—what she's stirring up in me is closer to the reaction I'd have to spoiled meat.

"Leave." The vein at my temple is pulsing hard enough to feel.

"No." She plants herself directly in front of me, close enough that her breast grazes my blazer.

I feel my whole face curl in distaste.

"I can show you a very good time."

"Goddamn it. LEAVE," I roar.

Her nostrils flare, and she snatches her discarded clothes off the floor and bolts for the door.

I walk back into my office and slam the door. Alone once again, I sweep everything off the desk. I'm breathing like I've run a mile.

Lorenzo leans in the doorway, arms crossed, watching me with a scowl.

"Why are you doing this to yourself?" he asks.

I sit on the edge of the desk, quietly working feeling back into my left hand where I slammed it against the laptop a minute ago. The pain goes all the way up to my shoulder. I keep my face even, adjusting the glove like that's all I'm doing, not soothing the pain.

Nobody knows about this hand except her. Not even Lorenzo, and he's closer to me than a brother.

"I love her," I mumble, tipping the whiskey bottle to my mouth. "I'm in love with a woman whose entire purpose in life seems to be defying me at every possible turn. I'm obsessed with a woman who treats the stray dogs on her walk with more warmth than she's ever shown me."

Lorenzo shrugs. "That's good news, if you think about it. The estate could use a woman's hand running it properly. And you need to start thinking about an heir eventually—neither of us will live forever, brother."

I scoff. We don't do this often, venting, but I trust him.

"She won't even look at me some days. I could lay the entire world at her feet, and she'd still look at me and see everything dark and broken about me first."

Lorenzo lights a cigar, leaning against the desk beside me. "You already have laid the world at her feet, brother. The only reason she's alive and breathing right now is because your name is attached to hers. She knows that. She has to."

I'm horrified to feel wetness tracking down my face. Lorenzo has the decency not to look at me while I wipe it away fast.

Men like me don't cry. I haven't cried over a single thing in my entire adult life.

Except her. Only ever her.

"Three years," I say, voice rough. "Three years chasing a woman who's never once looked at me the way I look at her. I want her so badly."

Lorenzo blows a slow line of smoke toward the ceiling, saying nothing for a moment.

"I only want her," I continue, because once it starts coming out I can't seem to stop it. "No one else. If there were a hundred women lined up at my feet tomorrow, I'd still be looking past every single one of them, searching the room for her."

"I hear you, brother. I do."

"Even the idea of her belonging to someone else guts me. And she still lets her pride get in the way, pretending she doesn't care, when I know—*I know*—she feels exactly what I feel. That she gets jealous, too, whether she'll ever admit it out loud."

Lorenzo taps ash off the end of his cigar, thinking. "I think this one's simple, actually."

I whip my head toward him, brow raised.

"Show her what her life looks like without you. Pull back, brother. Just for a few days. I know it'll feel like hell. But it’s necessary for her to realize exactly how much of the world she's been allowed to keep—the studio, her father still breathing, every soft thing she has—only exists because you've been standing between her and everyone who'd take it away. Show her that

the only reason her entire world hasn't already collapsed is because you're the one holding it up."

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Amara

This god-forsaken cobweb absolutely refuses to leave.

I stand higher on the chair, stretching the broom toward the corner of the ceiling. The chair wobbles under me, and I do my best to balance while swatting furiously at the corner.

It finally gives.

The cobweb gives with a spider I somehow did not clock nesting up there, which, in hindsight, I really should have worn my glasses for.

It drops directly down my shirt, landing somewhere between the humble valley of my chest, and I scream loud enough that I'm fairly sure the girls three blocks over at the old studio heard it, too.

In my absolute panic to get my shirt off my body, I forget entirely that I'm standing on a wobbly chair, and I go flying backward off it.

Thank God we've still got cushions scattered across the floor from cleaning, because the top half of me lands square in the middle of them instead of the tiles.

Amy comes sprinting over. "What's wrong? What happened?"

I stare up at her, mouth stuck open in a continuous scream, tugging the hem of my tank top downward while flashing her the top half of my chest in the process.

She has genuinely never looked more baffled in her entire life.

"They're lovely, dear, truly, but why exactly are you—" she starts, clearly traumatized to be getting an eyeful of my breasts.

"AHHHH," I scream directly into her face instead of answering.

That's when she spots the spider crawling its way out of the collar of my shirt.

Modesty dies in the face of survival. I rip the tank top the rest of the way off and hurl it across the room.

Amy snatches the broom out of my hands and beats the shirt until the spider explodes and leaves a stain the size of a dinner plate on the fabric.

I collapse back onto the cushions in just my bra, eyeing the ceiling with suspicion, fully expecting a second wave of spiders to rain down on me any second.

She tosses me a spare shirt, and I yank it on. My dignity, unfortunately, did not survive the incident and cannot be recovered.

She lowers herself down onto the cushions beside me, and we both take a breather from four straight hours of scrubbing and hauling boxes.

We're mid-move into the new place—the one Matteo prepaid a full year on. Amy still can't stop thanking me for somehow finding a space open for rent, in this neighborhood, at a price she can afford.

Which isn't entirely true. I told her a number that isn't real, and every month I plan on funneling the difference between what she thinks she owes and what my "connection" actually charges straight into a women's shelter downtown. She never has to know.

I scowl slightly at the thought of Matteo, who hasn't called, texted, shown up, or performed his usual morning ritual of force-feeding me breakfast in almost a week now.

I definitely don't miss it.

Not. At. All.

I grab my phone off the floor, sprawled starfish-style on the cushions, checking for anything from Mia. Nothing. Huh. Is my phone broken? I haven't gotten a single notification all day.

"Thank you so much, Amara. For all of this. For everything." Amy kisses my cheek.

I smile at her, even though I don't feel particularly great right now. I think I might be coming down with something.

"Stop thanking me." I wave her off.

She mimes zipping her lips shut and throwing away the key, wiggling her eyebrows at me.

I push myself up, dusting off. "We'll keep going tomorrow. I'm completely fried."

"You don't have to come back. You probably have plans. I can manage the rest myself."

I shake my head at her. She's not as young as she used to be, and I'm not about to let her carry boxes alone at her age. "I want to help. Don't fight me on it."

She grins up at me from the floor. "Deal."

I blow her a kiss on my way out, checking my phone one more time in the parking lot. Is my data broken? Did I forget to pay the bill?

I kick a rock and shove the phone back in my pocket.

Turns out the solution was right in front of me the entire time. All I had to do was remind him that other women exist in the world, apparently, and the man vanishes entirely.

Why didn't I think of that years ago?

Well. At least my pride's intact. This morning, Bianca—or whatever her actual name was—sent a message admitting the man in her bed photo hadn't been Matteo at all, that she'd photoshopped the whole thing, followed by a bitter apology before blocking me.

I have a feeling she only did that because Matteo threatened her. But I'm glad she found her way back to reality nevertheless.

Not that I care either way. Pfft. Why would I care?

By the time I make it home, I shower fast, throw on pajamas, and go looking for Lydia, starving.

"Lydia?" No answer.

Barefoot, I wander the kitchen looking for her.

"Lydia, Lili." My old nickname for her since I was maybe six.

I find her finally, and it's obvious right away she's not in a great mood. Maybe I'll just make myself a peanut butter sandwich instead.

"You hungry, girly?" She rubs at her lower back, wincing.

"Oh, not at all, actually. I ate out today."

A lie.

Everyone around me seems to be aging faster than I can process, and it hurts to watch.

Which means I'm getting older, too, and somehow I still have nothing to show for any of it—no career, no freedom, nothing except a devil who's been hunting me for three straight years.

Relief flickers across her face. "You sure?"

"Positive."

She stands, stretching her back out with a groan. "I'm heading to bed, then. Your father's in one of his moods tonight. Might want to steer clear of him for a bit."

I wrinkle my nose. "He's actually home?"

"In his office."

I nod and head that way, because self-preservation has never once been my strong suit. Things between us have gotten so strained it feels borderline unfixable most days. He won't stop. Won't choose us over his addiction. If my mother were still alive, she'd have slapped some sense into him years before it got this far.

I knock. A rough "come in" answers back.

What I find on the other side stops me cold.

His eyes are dark, red-rimmed, swollen. He's been crying, and not just a little.

"What's wrong?" I skip the greeting entirely.

It's like he'd just been waiting for someone to finally ask.

"Matteo pulled out." His voice cracks. "Out of the arrangement he'd promised to help with. The debt collectors aren't happy, Amara. Not happy at all."

My legs go weak enough that I have to limp the rest of the way to the chair across from him, sitting without meeting his eyes. I can't look at the man he's turned into. I can't.

"Father. Weren't those debts already handled? Why does this keep happening?"

His hands slam against the desk, and I flinch hard. A second later, his phone buzzes, and whatever's on the screen drains every last bit of color from his face.

"Sorry, sorry, Amara. I'm just—frustrated." He flips the phone face-down with hands that won't stop shaking.

Who texted him? What did they say?

"I can't seem to stop, little girl. I'm so sorry." He drops his face into both hands.

I bite down hard on my own lip to keep from crying.

Why hasn't Matteo bailed him out this time, the way he has every single time before?

Did I push too far?

It seems like he's finally given me exactly what I always wanted. He let go.

I swallow around the lump forming in my throat. This is a good thing. It is. Without Matteo constantly cleaning up my father's messes, maybe he'll be forced to stop. We'll figure it out ourselves. It won't be easy—God, it won't be easy—but once we do, I finally get my life back.

Yes. Okay. This is okay. This has to be okay.

"Maybe this is actually good, Father." I reach across and squeeze his hand. "We'll figure it out. I don't care if we have to work three jobs each, or sell the house, or start completely over from nothing. We'll manage."

He opens his mouth like he's about to scream, then seems to catch himself, eyes flicking sideways to the wall instead of at me. He clears his throat.

"We could work for the rest of our lives, little girl, and we wouldn't put a dent in it."

My stomach drops straight through the floor.

"No." I shake my head, rubbing hard at the back of my neck. "No, there's no way. There's no way you'd be that reckless. That selfish. I don't believe you."

"I'm sorry."

"How much, Father?" I hiss. "How much?"

"I'm sorry, Amara."

"That's not an answer! How much?"

He won't say the number. He just keeps repeating the apology.

"You're never going to stop, are you?" It comes out as barely more than a whisper, tears streaming down my face before I can stop them. "Even now. Even with everything this has already cost. You're never going to stop."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that!" My hand moves, and a wine glass shatters against the wall behind him.

"Show some respect!" he roars back, standing so fast his chair skids against the floor.

"Respect?" I'm openly sobbing now. "You want respect? I look at you and I know that even with every single option gone, you'd never stop. You would gamble me away. You'd put me down as the prize before you'd ever walk away."

His eyes go wide with something that looks almost like horror, and I think it's because some part of him knows it's the truth.

"That's not—Amara, that's not fair," he stammers.

"Isn't it, though?" I wipe uselessly at my face. "Tell me it's not fair. What if Matteo chooses not to pull out anymore? Tell me, right now, that if Matteo walked back through that door tonight and gave you the same offer

as before… to erase every cent of this in exchange for my hand, you wouldn't already have the pen in your fingers. Just like you already did when the option was on the table. Isn’t that you gambling me away? You’ve already done it once, and you’ll do it again. If not with Matteo, with someone else."

He stares at the desk, jaw working, saying nothing at all.

"That's what I thought." I sigh.

"Don't say that," he begs. "You are my daughter. My little girl. I love you more than anything in this world, I swear it."

"Then prove it." I stand, gripping the back of the chair for balance. "Prove it by seeking help for your gambling addiction. Please, Father. Please just choose me. One time. That's all I've ever asked."

He looks at me for a long time, but I can’t understand a single thing in his eyes. We have become strangers. His phone buzzes again on the desk, face-down, and his eyes dart to it.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, reaching for his phone again.

I turn and walk out without saying another thing, because there's nothing left to say to a man who's already made his choice, over and over.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Amara

A short while after that conversation, everything goes up in flames.

I sit frozen in a chair, watching men I've never seen before tear through our dining room, snapping chair legs against the wall, and sweeping vanities clean off their stands.

My father sits beside me, and we both look exactly as pathetic as we are.

The debt collectors have come to collect, and it is not a polite visit.

Some ugly, small part of me is waiting for Matteo to burst through that door and end this. Even underneath all my anger, all my resentment, I know he saved me from this a lot of times. Albeit, for selfish reasons.

One of them hurls a chair straight past my father's skull.

I flinch, but I beg myself to hold it together.

I'm a woman who built her entire survival on the back of her own tormentor.

I'm not book-smart. My resume doesn't exist, because my father never let me try for even the smallest entry-level job. Every time I got close to convincing him otherwise, Matteo stepped in and promised to burn down whatever place dared hire me.

And ballet. God, ballet. He sabotaged every single chance I've ever had, and made sure word spread far enough, fast enough, that no theater would ever risk hiring me again.

I could have run. Left every man in my life behind and built something small and safe somewhere none of them could find me.

Except that was never actually an option. He would have hunted me across continents if he'd had to.

He's the reason I lean on him this hard, and there is nothing left for me to do about it now.

I curl into myself as more crashing echoes through the house.

A man with tattoos covering his entire face crowds my father against the wall, feeding the barrel of a gun straight past his teeth.

My father gags around the metal, eyes wide.

"One week," the man spits. "That's all you get."

I swallow hard, staring down at my hands, drowning in shame at the fact that I'm still praying my tormentor swoops in to fix this.

But he already gave me exactly what I said I wanted. He let go.

And now, bitter and furious with myself, I understand I cannot survive this world without him standing between me and it.

Lydia comes down the stairs slowly, woken by the noise. Her eyes go wide at the sight of the four men wrecking the living room.

"W-what—" she stammers.

The tallest one crosses the room in two strides and grabs her by the throat, lifting her clean off the floor. Her feet dangle several inches above the carpet.

"STOP!"

My father's hand clamps down on my arm, yanking me back onto the couch I didn't realize I'd stood up from. "Sit. Down."

"Don't touch me." I wrench my arm free without looking at him. "This is all your fault."

His warnings dissolve somewhere between one ear and the other, and I'm already moving toward the man before I've fully thought it through.

I dig my nails into his forearm. "Let. Her. Go."

Lydia's gone pale, but she manages one weak shake of her head at me, begging me silently to back off.

He doesn't let go. I start hitting his arm with both fists. "Let. Her. Go."

Desperate, I sink my teeth into the same arm. "I said let her go, you coward."

He finally releases her, and she crumples to the floor. I catch her, pulling her into my arms while she sobs into my neck, both of us shaking.

The man I just bit doesn't retaliate against me at all—nothing I braced myself for. Instead, he simply turns and drives his fist into my father's stomach.

I look away.

One of the other men picks up a framed photo of my mother off the shelf and throws it against the wall.

I stand and go straight at him.

I know he's twice my size. I know he could snap my neck.

I want exactly that. Want this to just be over, one way or another.

I hit him and hit him and hit him, fists landing wherever they land, and I only stop when I notice he isn't hitting back at all.

"Why?" I'm gasping for air, chest heaving.

"No one who knows what's good for him touches the devil's girl," he says, saying it plainly, sidestepping me.

My mouth falls open.

I'm not his girl anymore. Not since he let go. But telling them that right now would be catastrophically stupid, so I keep my mouth shut.

The devil ruined my entire life and then left me standing alone in the wreckage of it.

"Leave!" I scream.

It's like I don't exist in this room at all.

I march up to another one and slap him across the face. "I told you to leave!"

He just turns away and keeps searching the room for whatever he thinks is worth pawning.

Lydia grabs my arm and drags me toward the kitchen. I let her—what else is there left to do. She pulls me under the counter, huddling us both into the small space.

"Thank you," she whispers, voice shaking, "for being brave enough to do that. For me."

"What are we going to do?"

"One thing at a time. Right now, we just survive tonight."

I lose track of minutes, hours, listening to my father's occasional groans through the wall.

Every time guilt starts creeping in about leaving him out there alone, I remind myself he'd have auctioned me off at a card table in a heartbeat.

After what feels like hours, one voice rises above the rest.

"One week is all you get. Hope you got the message this time. Or else."

My father screams in pain, and I bite down on my own fist to keep from making a sound.

It seems to be finally over.

Lydia starts to crawl out from under the counter toward the doorway. My legs refuse to move at all, rooted in place.

Another voice. "Since the girl's tucked away safe, why don't we send him off properly?"

“Love that idea.”

Gunfire erupts, wall to wall, and I curl into myself.

"LYDIA, HIDE! HIDE!" My voice tears itself raw, screaming until the gunfire finally stops after what sounds like ten full magazines emptied at once.

Then silence.

It's over.

It's all over.

I don't come out. I already know exactly what I'll find if I do.

"Lydia," I whisper from where I'm still curled into the corner of the cabinet space.

Nothing.

"Lydia, please. Talk to me."

Nothing.

"Lydia—do you remember the song you used to sing me to sleep? When I was ten? Please. Just sing it. I know it's ridiculous, just—please."

Nothing.

"Lili. I'm begging you."

Nothing.

"Lili. Lili. LILI."

"I'm sorry, little girl," I hear my father say, somewhere close.

And I scream.

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Chapter Thirty

Amara

I've always hated funerals.

If that man in the second row coughs one more time without covering his mouth, I'm going to end him myself. Lydia hated that. Hated people who coughed into open air with no consideration of others.

What if she can see this?

She can't. It's a closed casket. I know that. Besides, she's dead. I keep forgetting. I still turn and glare at him anyway, and he freezes mid-cough, cheeks flushing.

"Knock it off," I order in a hushed tone. "Lili didn't like that."

He nods fast, eyes darting sideways to the girl beside him. I catch both of them fighting back laughter.

I don't care. As long as nobody upsets her before she goes into the ground.

An elbow finds my ribs. My father, bruised down, shoulder shot through and strapped into a brace.

"Stop it," he hisses under his breath. "You're embarrassing us."

My nostrils flare. "Don't talk to me."

"You can't hold a grudge forever, Amara."

A grudge. He thinks this is a grudge.

It isn't a grudge. It's hate.

I hated him fully and completely the second I saw Lydia lying in a pool of her own blood on our kitchen floor.

"I wish it were you," I whisper, watching the priest sprinkle holy water across her casket.

"What?" He turns to me, shock on his face.

"I. Wish. It. Were. You." I make sure every single word lands separately.

He goes ashen. "You can't mean that. I know I messed up. But I'm still your father, little girl. I'm still your papa."

"If it had been you," I say, quiet, “it would have been fair. Why did she have to pay for what you did?"

His hand tightens on my shoulder. "You're angry. You don't mean that. I know you don't mean that, baby girl."

Fire shoots out of my eyes in his direction.

"I mean every single word. It should have been you."

I stand and move away from him, over toward Lydia's sister and her nephews on the other side. Since there's no chair left over there, I lean against a large framed photo of her instead, propped against an easel, and trace my fingers along the edge of it.

I am so, so alone right now.

Why did it have to be her?

Her youngest nephew stands immediately, offering me his seat. I shake my head and sit on the ground instead, resting my back against the photo.

Her sister passes me a tissue. Part of me wants to tell her I don't deserve to cry, that I don't have the right to grieve. I take the napkin anyway and thank her.

I fail everyone I touch.

Maybe if I'd just stopped fighting Matteo—stopped defying him at every single turn—the debt collectors never would have come, and she'd still be alive to sing to me when I couldn't sleep.

The sobs that come out of me are ugly enough that Andrew—sixteen, Lydia's oldest nephew—slides down off his chair and sits on the floor beside me, arms coming around my shoulders.

I've known these boys for years. Summers spent chasing them through the garden, teaching them card games Lydia hated me teaching them. I failed them, too.

"It's going to be okay," he whispers.

"No. It's not."

"The police are going to find whoever did this attack," he promises. "You need to be strong. For your dad, while he recovers."

The police won’t find anything. Lydia knew the disgusting world she was working in from the very first time she stepped into our home, but she never told a soul.

For my father.

God, damn him.

I've already lost her. What exactly is left to lose after this?

The rest of the service passes in pieces I don't fully register. I have to physically stop myself from following the casket down into that six-foot hole after it. When the dirt starts hitting the top of it, I die inside.

She's gone.

Andrew helps me stand, keeping a hand under my elbow until my legs remember how to hold me up. People start filing away in twos and threes. My father is among the very first to leave.

Fine. I'll walk. Or find a cab.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," I whisper to her sister.

She cups my cheek, and the gesture is so exactly Lydia that fresh tears break loose all over again. "She loved you so much, you know."

"I loved her, too," I whisper.

I wipe my nose, trying to gather what's left of myself. "She told me, a while back—if anything ever happened to her, she wanted me to give you this."

I'm lying.

I finally pawned the rings, and I'm giving nearly all of it to this family. I kept a small piece back for myself, enough to run if I ever actually manage it, enough to eat. My father's completely broke now, with no one left to bail him out, and by extension so am I, so this had to be enough to last.

But money was never going to bring her back, and it definitely isn't going to soothe my guilt.

"What is this?" Andrew asks, taking the plain black duffel from my hands.

"I don't know exactly. She just told me to make sure you opened it somewhere private."

My way of dodging any question about how a housekeeper ended up with this much money to leave behind, because she didn't.

"Okay," her sister says, squeezing my hand. "Take care of yourself, sweetheart."

"You, too," I manage, and we part ways at the edge of the gravel path.

They buried her in a small wooded cemetery, a handful of other graves scattered under the trees, and I find myself walking without any real direction.

It starts raining somewhere along the way.

Near the tree line, I catch sight of someone standing still among the trunks.

Him.

Matteo. All black, hands in his pockets, just watching me approach through the rain like he's been standing there the entire time.

I don't decide to run at him. My body just does it.

I hit him. Everywhere I can reach.

He takes every single one of them without flinching or raising a single hand to stop me.

I've never been a violent person. Never once in my life wanted to hurt anyone before all of this. But something in me has gone dark enough now that I don't recognize my own hands anymore.

"Why?" I sob it out, not even sure what I'm actually asking. "WHY?"

"I'm sorry, baby." He reaches out to catch me when my heel gives out on the wet ground. I kick the shoes off entirely.

"I'm not your baby. You left me. You left me alone in a house with—" There isn't a way to finish that sentence out loud. He did exactly what I asked him to, but I never expected it to end like this.

"Isn't that what you wanted?" he asks.

Yes. But not like this. Never like this—had I known how bad it really was.

I slap him. Hard enough that my palm stings.

He doesn't so much as flinch in anger. If anything, something like anguish moves across his face instead.

"I never meant for it to end like this," he mutters.

I look down at my own hands, horrified—hands that apparently only know how to hit, hurt, and scheme lately.

"STOP IT. Baby, stop." His voice comes from somewhere far away, and when I come back to myself I realize I've been biting and scratching at my own skin, both my hands now caught inside one of his, holding them still against his chest.

"These hands feel like sugar and honey against me, baby. Don't punish yourself with them. Use me instead. Hit me as many times as you need to. I can take it."

"You left me," I sob. "You left me alone, and she's—she's gone because of it, because of you, because of both of us, because I couldn't just—"

"I showed you." His hands come up to frame my face, thumbs wiping uselessly at tears the rain keeps replacing. "Sometimes a person doesn't realize what they're wishing for until they have it. I was always there, baby. Every single second. Watching. Protecting. I just let you feel, for a few days, exactly what the absence looks like."

"Lydia is gone," I gasp out. "She's gone, Matteo. She sang to me when I was ten years old and now she's in the ground and I can't even—"

"I know." He presses his mouth to my temple, achingly gentle for a man who orchestrated every second of this. "I'm sorry. I am. But this had to happen. You needed to see, with your own eyes, exactly what a life without me actually looks like."

So this is the choice, apparently. Him—his control, his obsession, his terrifying, suffocating version of love, wrapped around safety, protection, a life where nothing touches me because he's already burned it down first. Or freedom, except everyone I've ever loved ends up dead along the way to get there.

The rain keeps coming down over both of us, washing tears off my face as fast as they fall.

"Please don't cry, baby. You know your tears are the one thing I've never had a defense against."

"I only have you." I go pale as I realize the truth.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. From the very beginning."

"It's not—it's not you I want. It's—"

"It is, baby." He pulls me in against his chest, rain soaking through both our clothes, his heartbeat loud and steady under my ear. "Yes. It is."

I don't have the strength left to fight. I melt into him despite every part of me screaming not to.

I'm so confused. I thought him letting me go would get me the life I always wanted.

Instead it buried Lydia.

He bends and scoops me up. I don't fight it. There's no fire left in me to fight with. He carries me through the rain to his car and settles me into the front seat.

The heat comes on a second later, and only then do I realize how cold I actually am.

He disappears around to the trunk and comes back with a dry jacket, wrapping it around my shoulders himself.

He leans in, mouth close to my ear. "I love you. I love you so much it terrifies me some days." His hand finds my jaw, turning my face gently toward his. "If you just accept the life I'm offering you—stop fighting it every single day—you will never have to feel like this again. Nothing will ever touch you. Nothing will ever get close enough to take anything from you again. I promise you that."

I don't have an answer.

"I'm going to find every single person responsible for what happened," he continues. "For you. I already know most of their names. It won't take long."

I'm not horrified.

I should be horrified. Instead, something in my chest settles at the thought, wanting exactly what he's offering. Wanting it badly.

I'm not the same girl I was a week ago. Whatever version of me used to exist got buried with Lydia.

He peppers kisses all over my face.

"I know you pawned the rings," he murmurs against my skin. "I know you've been pricing cheap one-way flights to Mexico."

My whole body goes rigid.

"If you run," he says, and his hand tightens slightly at my waist, "worse things would happen than anything you're imagining right now. And it would be pointless regardless. I'd have you back within the day. I always would."

He straightens, rounds the hood, and slides into the driver's seat.

He’s the same man he always was. And me? I'm just gone.

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Chapter Thirty-One

Amara

My plate looks as appetizing as dishwater leftovers.

I can't make myself swallow any of it.

It's been two weeks since that dreaded day.

Our house is littered with bullet holes we never patched, anything that made this place feel like a home pawned off or sold, and whatever furniture's left standing is held together with duct tape.

I push the food around my plate instead of eating it.

"Eat, Amara." My father's voice comes out careful, like he's testing whether I'll respond to him at all today.

My father, who I haven't spoken to since the funeral. Haven't so much as looked directly at in two weeks. We sit across from each other at chairs held together with scotch tape.

"It's your favorite. I made it myself, just for you. Please. Eat something," he begs.

He's been doing all the household chores lately, since I can't seem to get myself out of bed most days. Can't cook. Can't clean. Can't do much of anything.

Matteo's back in the picture now, which somehow makes me feel safer, even though I know exactly what that safety costs.

The same man who dragged me into this exact nightmare has become the only solid thing left standing under me. If he'd never set his sights on me, my father would have been left to face his own consequences alone, and maybe—maybe—I could have disappeared to France. Danced somewhere nobody knew my last name. Married some ordinary, safe man.

I could have vanished entirely. Except the debt collectors would have hunted me down anyway, collateral for his gambling. I keep running the maybes in my head. Maybe if Matteo had never kept bailing my father out, he would have hit rock bottom on his own and actually stopped—the way he nearly did once, years ago, before Matteo ever entered our lives.

Matteo fed this addiction by making the consequences disappear every single time.

Matteo ruined every real chance I ever had at a dance career out of jealousy, out of fear that his enemies would use me on the stage against him. He made me a target.

Matteo has controlled every single choice I've made for three straight years.

And now, somehow, that exact same man is the only person left who can pull me out of the hole he helped dig in the first place.

If Matteo's in my life, it's in shambles. If Matteo's out of my life, it's in pieces entirely. There's no version of this where I get a happy ending.

"Amara! Look at me when I'm speaking to you!"

I snap out of it, but I still don't lift my eyes to his. I push back from the table and stand instead.

"Please." His chair scrapes as he half-rises, too. "Please, just—five minutes. That's all I'm asking."

I don't stop walking.

"I know I don't deserve five minutes. But please… give me a chance."

I make it to the base of the stairs.

"You have to forgive me at some point. That's what families do, Amara. Your father messed up. He wasn't a good man to you, and he knows it. He may have ruined pieces of your life you can never get back. But he regrets every single one of them. He loves you more than he's ever loved anything, including the tables that ruined him. You have to forgive me. Please."

Why is he talking about himself like he's a stranger explaining a case file? Does he think putting distance between himself and his own actions makes any of this easier to listen to?

"Never." I curse myself immediately for not managing to just keep walking.

I bolt up the stairs and slam my door hard.

"Amara, please—" His voice follows me halfway up, then gives up.

"I'll leave your plate out. In case you get hungry later." A pause. "I love you, little girl. I know you don't want to hear that right now. I'm still going to say it."

I crawl under my bed, staring into the dark space.

The men who did this to Lydia have been dealt with. Matteo made sure of that personally. But they were only ever the hired hands; the system

won’t ever be touched, waiting to produce another version of the same night somewhere down the line.

I've made peace, somehow, with not feeling guilty about their deaths. What I can't make peace with is the fact that I turned into exactly the kind of monster that used to make me sick.

My hands move on their own, doing what they've always done when I’m stressed. Trying to self-soothe by masturbating.

I look away from the teddy bear Matteo gave me months ago, the one I never managed to throw out no matter how many times I told myself to. It's stupidly soft, stupidly cute, and doing anything like this in front of it feels wrong.

I close my eyes and rub my clit, trying to chase something—anything—that might quiet the noise in my head. It doesn't work. There's no relief in it tonight, just my brain circling the same images over and over.

You're as bad as all of them.

You're a failure.

No one will ever love you enough to walk away from this life for you.

I take my hand out of my underwear and press the heel of it hard against my eyes instead, trying to shove the voice out of my skull. *Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.*

Why won't it ever just shut up?

My phone rings. I ignore it, staring at the ceiling.

It rings again.

And again.

And again.

I can't stand the combination of the ringtone and the voice in my head talking over each other anymore, so I grab it without checking the screen.

"What?" I scream into it, not caring who's on the other end.

"I've been thinking about you all night, and how beautiful you look rubbing that little pussy that’s mine," Matteo says.

I sit up fast, scanning the dark room. "Where are you?"

"The tree line past your house."

My brow furrows. "How long?"

"Every night for weeks."

I shake my head, even though he can't see it.

"You can't do this."

"I can. And I am. I'm worried about you, so I've been sleeping in my car outside your window. You're welcome to tell me to leave, but I won't take that suggestion."

I get up, wearing nothing but a tank top and underwear, and cross to the window, cracking the blinds just enough to look through. Sure enough, there's his car.

But my blinds were shut. I never left them open.

"How did you see me?" I hiss, outraged.

Even inside my bedroom, there's no privacy.

He laughs. "Mr. Muffin's always been useful for that."

I turn slowly toward the teddy bear sitting on my dresser. Irrational—it's stuffing and fabric—but I still feel betrayed.

I put the phone on speaker, toss it onto the bed, and grab the scissors off my desk.

Goodbye, traitor.

I cut it apart until there's nothing left that resembles a bear at all.

"Oh, poor Mr. Muffin," he mock-mourns through the speaker.

"Shut up." I toss the ruined remains out the window.

"You found one camera, out of a dozen I had placed in that room. Want to guess where the rest are?"

I spin in a slow circle. Panic claws up my throat. I already know finding them all is impossible, especially in the state I'm in right now.

"What do you want?" I snap.

"To know that you're okay."

"Do you want me to lie? Tell you I'm perfectly fine, that I'm thrilled at the idea that my next breath depends on you?"

He exhales, and I hear the click of a lighter, the small hiss of a cigarette catching. He's smoking. This man has an addiction.

"No, my love. I just want you to talk to me. That's all I'm asking."

"Then come to my room," I whisper.

A pause. "What?"

"Come. To. My. Room."

The line goes dead, and I already know he's crossing the yard before I've even set the phone down. I don't bother going down to unlock the front door—I'm certain he's had a copy of every key in this house for years. My father's long asleep down the hall.

I'm not interested in talking at all.

I'm interested in forgetting. Even if forgetting only lasts until morning.

Seconds later, he opens my bedroom door and quietly closes it behind him.

He stands perfectly still, his eyes fixed on my frame. I sigh and walk toward him until my bare toes brush against his expensive Italian shoes—the same shoes he'd used to step on people without a second thought.

"Make me forget," I beg.

He already did it once, on the restaurant table. The lines have already been crossed, so why not cross them again?

I. Want. To. Forget.

And I'd literally sleep with the devil if it meant I could.

He crashes his lips toward mine, intending to kiss me, but I turn my head away.

We kissed before, two times. But now, it feels like if I kiss him… I'd drown. I'd shatter. Now is different than then. And I just won't let myself do it.

"Anything but that," I whisper.

I can feel the hot puffs of his angry breaths against my face.

"Why?" he hisses. "Am I good enough to fuck but not good enough to kiss?"

"I'd give you everything... but not that."

I can use him to forget, but kissing is for people who are in love. People who are happy.

And that isn't me.

His hand tightens in my hair, and silence stretches between us for a few seconds. I think he's going to leave, but instead, he sinks his teeth into my neck before peppering it with hickeys.

"You're mine," he growls.

"Yours," I whisper, because it's the truth.

He owns me.

He makes quick work of undressing me before tossing me onto the bed.

He starts by kissing me from my ankles all the way to my inner thighs.

"Get it over with," I sigh, wanting him to stop kissing my skin like that.

I'd always been a romantic girl, but I can't accept that from him. I can't let him into my heart.

He bites my inner thigh.

"This is my body," he murmurs. "And I'll love it as much as I want."

I bite my lip, feeling him decorate my skin with hickeys.

And then his mouth is on my pussy. I don't even have it in me to feel self-conscious anymore when I just want him to shut up the chorus of bitter voices in my mind.

My back arches at the first lick, and a soft moan escapes my lips.

I'd always wondered what it would feel like to have someone's tongue there.

It's heaven.

He doesn't leave a single crevice unloved.

"*My* pussy is delicious," he hums between kisses to my folds.

He sucks my clit hard, swirling his tongue around it at the same time. And I come.

I forget everything but the pleasure for the moment. I melt into the high and the attention of his tongue.

But I want more.

I don't want to remember anything.

So I spread my legs wider.

"You can have me," I whisper. "Please... you must want release, too."

I'm offering the devil my virginity. But why does it matter? He owns me either way, whether I want it or not.

He shakes his head, wiping my juices from his face with his forearm. I blush three different shades of red.

He lies beside me, pulling me against his chest. One arm wraps around my waist while his other hand cups my breast—not with hunger, but with tenderness. Like he just craves to be intimate with me.

"No," he murmurs. "Just let me cuddle you."

I stare at him.

"Men like you don't cuddle," I whisper.

A smile ghosts across his lips.

"Your man does."

I swallow.

"And your man won't fuck you until he knows you're in the right headspace for it. Not when you're just using him to forget."

Guilt pricks at my heart because he's right.

I was using him. And even though he's not a good person, that's an awful thing to do to someone.

I really don't recognize myself anymore.

But he doesn't look offended.

If anything, he just holds me tighter.

"You can use me as a footstool for all I care," he murmurs. "Just realize how much I love you."

I look away, hating to admit how soothing his arms feel around me.

How safe they feel.

So I close my eyes and allow myself this guilty pleasure.

Giving my body to the devil...

Sleeping next to him...

Finding comfort in him from his own hell.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

Matteo

She is a vision on my arm. My angel. The one who haunts every hour I'm awake and most of the ones I'm not.

The most beautiful woman to ever walk this earth, one who makes even stone look better for having been touched by her feet.

And she's mine. Completely. Totally. Irrevocably, whether she's decided to accept that yet or not.

A tear slides down her cheek as she turns to look at me, and even her tears manage to be beautiful—though I take no satisfaction in them. I swear that on everything I own. It seems, unfortunately, to be the only thing I trigger in her these days.

My jaw ticks.

"The tears you shed for another man break me, my love. They burn."

She sniffles, wipes at her nose with one knuckle, and turns her attention back to the ceremony.

I try to track exactly where her eyes are pointed—at the groom, I assume, which would require me to pull my gun and put a bullet through his skull—but her gaze is fixed on the bride instead. Not on him. On the woman I personally arranged to marry the man Amara was supposed to end up with.

"I would burn the entire world down for you." My voice drops low enough that only she can hear it. "I'd kill for you without blinking. I've done, and will keep doing, awful, unforgivable things just to keep you mine. And still—I love you. I cherish every part of you. What does that pathetic excuse of a man have that I don't? He folded the second things got difficult. He's never once obsessed over you the way I have for three straight years. There is nothing on this earth he could give you that I couldn't give you better."

She laughs, bitter, twisting the ring I forced back onto her finger this morning. "Are you sure about that?"

Something sparks behind my eyes. "Tell me exactly what he has that I don't. What could he possibly give you that I can't?"

She keeps her eyes locked on the aisle.

"Freedom. A life that isn't soaked in blood and death and injustice."

The whiskey glass trembles slightly in my hand as I bring it to my mouth. I take a slow sip before answering. "No. I can't give you that one thing. I won't pretend otherwise." My tone softens, almost pleading. "But you'll grow used to it. You'll learn to love me enough that it stops mattering. Because no one—not on this earth, not in whatever comes after it—will ever love you the way I do."

She nods, distracted, and something in that nod unsettles me. The bitter defiance she's thrown in my face for three years is nowhere in it. Have I finally broken her?

That was never the plan. I don't want her broken. I want her standing beside me because she chooses to. Even if I have to force the beginning of it—even if the only way she ever discovers how happy we could be is by me holding the door shut until she stops trying the handle.

Because everything I've told her tonight is true. I love this woman in a way I don't think another human being has ever managed to love anyone else. I need her the way I need oxygen.

Lorenzo was right about showing her how a life without me standing between her and the world would look like. Even if it killed me to stay away.

Would any of this have happened if I hadn't seen her dancing through that window three years ago? Impossible to know now, and pointless to dwell on. That door closed the second I saw her. The idea of a version of reality where I never found her twists something violent and nauseous in my stomach every time it crosses my mind.

I love that woman with everything I have, and everything I've taken, and everything I'll never give back.

I also know, clearly, that she's been using me. The night she first invited me into her room wasn't the last—she's asked for more since.

But it’s all just a distraction for her.

I let her. She can use me however she wants, take whatever she needs from my body. But every time she's tried to offer to return the favor or go

all the way, I've said no. I need her to love me before that. I'd suffer endless blue balls for that feat.

Because I already know some part of her does. I've felt it in the way her breathing changes when I say her name. I've seen it in the two seconds before she remembers to hate me again.

"Forcing me to come here was cruel," she mutters, even as she leans further into my side to avoid the stares of a crowd.

A clean crowd who don't know who either of us are. Well, except Adrien's mother, who keeps glaring at my woman. If she wasn't so old and frail, I would have… I shake the thought away, relaxing my fists.

"Think of it as closure," I tell her, pressing a kiss to her temple, then aiming a warning look at a girl three tables over who won't stop staring. She finds somewhere else to look immediately.

"No one here knows who we are, and they're all clearly dying to. Why did we even come to this? We already ruined his life. Now we're crashing his wedding, too?" She mutters under her breath.

"Well." I turn my glass slowly in my fingers. "I paid for the venue. The catering. His mother's cancer treatment. His student loans. I think that earns us a seat at the table, don't you? How could I possibly miss watching my own investment finally pay out?"

"What?" She goes rigid beside me, leaning back in her chair, eyes drifting up toward the tent ceiling like she's trying to physically process the sentence. "You arranged his marriage."

I'll admit, I genuinely thought she'd have pieced that together sooner.

"Of course, my love. I couldn't very well leave you thinking he was still available, when the only thing actually available to you was ever going to be me."

Her fingers find the ring on her hand again, twisting it. "In exchange for all those—benefits. Money."

"Yes. Sorry to break it to you, love, but your knight in shining scrubs sold you out fairly cheaply. Which is idiotic on his part, considering you were the real prize the entire time. Even if men have laid entire kingdoms at my feet—hypothetically, since there's rarely a kingdom I don't already own—in exchange for letting you go, I'd have them gutted for even suggesting it."

She rubs at her face, wincing, glancing down at her fingers to check for smudged makeup. I take the napkin from beside my plate and gently wipe

away the streak of mascara at the corner of her eye.

We end up close enough that our mouths are almost touching. As always, she turns her head at the last second, and I watch her settle back into her chair instead.

When will she let me kiss her properly? She'll let me do almost anything else to her body in the dark, in private, but a kiss in daylight is apparently a bridge too far.

I hear my own jaw crack from how hard I'm clenching it.

She clears her throat instead of acknowledging any of that. "Thank you," she mutters, meaning the napkin.

We both watch as the newlyweds take their first dance, and even though every piece of this wedding was arranged by my hand, from the venue to the vows, Adrien doesn't look bothered. His scar has semi-healed, and he looks happy, laughing at something his bride whispers against his ear.

I watch Amara clock it, too. Something in her shoulders drop half an inch.

"What, baby? No rage tonight?"

She exhales. "There's no point. He clearly doesn't mind any of it."

Exactly, my love. I tried to warn you that you deserved better. That you deserved me. I suppose some lessons only take when you're forced to watch them happen in real time.

Across the tent, another couple sways badly to the music, clearly a groomsman and someone's cousin who've had one too many glasses of champagne. Amara's eyes catch on them for a second, something wistful crossing her face before she looks away again, back toward her own hands.

"Now that we've had our—" she licks her lips, searching for the word, "—closure, or whatever this was supposed to be, can we leave? My feet have gone completely numb in these heels."

I stand, and I carry her out of the venue myself, ignoring every set of eyes that follows us across the lawn.

My plan has come to fruition.

And sooner or later—I have to believe this, because the alternative is unthinkable—she is going to look at what's left of her life, and what's still standing in it, and finally say the words to herself that I've already known were true for three straight years.

I love you, Matteo.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

Amara

Maybe I should have felt more heartbroken watching a man I once hoped to marry get married to someone else, with me sitting in the audience instead of standing at the altar.

But he looked happy.

Of course he did. Why wouldn't he be? His debts are gone. His mother's getting the best treatment most people can't dream of affording. And on top of all that, he's now married to a woman who could stop traffic just by walking down a street.

What's there not to be happy about, on paper?

That's the thing about deals with the devil—he always makes them look enticing right up until the fine print becomes relevant. Adrien's inside this world now, too, whether he understands that yet or not, and at some point, he's going to find out exactly why I tried so hard to run from it.

Maybe it happens when his new wife gets sent to spy on the Bratva and doesn't come home one night. Maybe it happens when some old flame from the Cosa Nostra finds out she got married and decides to redecorate their front door with bullet holes. Because Matteo pulled a woman straight out of this world to hand to Adrien, and the consequences of that will find him eventually—if not tomorrow, then in a few years, and if not then, on whatever day finally catches up to him.

That's just the arithmetic of this life.

When it happens, I hope to God he can forgive me for being the reason any of this started. I hope every single benefit he collected turns out to have been worth it in the end.

But none of that was what wrecked me.

It was a groomsman. Some cousin of the bride whose name I don’t even know.

They just looked so happy. So normal. So safe.

That's always been all I ever wanted.

They danced without flinching every time a door opened somewhere behind them. She never once checked over her shoulder, because nobody's ever made a habit of watching her from a distance. They talked about things like dreading Monday, some coworker they both apparently hate, a string of bad first dates.

They're living. Experiencing an ordinary life.

When do I get that? Will I ever get that?

But the same fundamental truth's been sitting under every decision I've made for three years—nothing gets past Matteo Russo. Nothing ever has.

Which is exactly why I'm standing outside his gates tonight.

The guards' eyes go wide the second they spot me walking up. One elbows the other, who was facing the opposite direction, and the second guy snaps to attention fast, murmuring something into his radio too low for me to catch.

"Hi, I'm h—" I don't even get the sentence out before the gate's already swinging open, both of them stepping aside for me to pass.

"Um. Okay. Thanks." I mumble it and hurry past before either of them can decide to stare any harder.

Inside, a man greets me at the door, and I fight not to flinch. He's tall—taller than Matteo, actually—built like a murder weapon, tattoos of guns and roses and bullet casings running up both forearms, a buzz cut that makes him look even scarier. Matteo's scary in a refined way, the kind of handsome that makes people forget to be afraid until it's too late. This man looks like fear itself.

"Hello, Amara. I've been waiting a long time to meet you."

Waiting how? Eagerly? Dreading it? He's genuinely terrifying to look at, and yet—with Matteo somewhere in this house, I realize I don't actually feel afraid standing in front of him. Just wary. My tormentor's spent three years proving he's also, somehow, my protector.

"I'm sorry?"

He extends a hand, and it's an oddly formal gesture for a man his size. "Lorenzo. Your fiancé's second in command."

I study his hand for a beat longer than is polite before shaking it. His grip is surprisingly gentle.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I say, and it's a lie, entirely built on prejudice. Which is wrong. For all I actually know, this man is a literal teddy bear.

Something in his face softens when he smiles.

"Likewise. He's in his office, waiting for you."

I shift on my feet when he doesn't move to walk me there. In organizations like this, I'd assumed nobody roams unescorted.

"Do I just—go up myself?"

He nods, another small, careful smile, and I get the sense this warmth isn't his natural setting, and just something he's putting on so I don't feel unsafe.

"Top floor, to your right. Matteo wanted you to know you're free to walk anywhere in the estate you like. It's going to be your home, too, eventually."

"Right. Thank you." I sigh and head for the stairs, already deciding I have zero interest in exploring anywhere.

I didn't come for a tour. I came for a come-to-Jesus conversation, and I intend to have it before I lose my nerve.

I knock, and wait for his voice before pushing the door open, poking my head in first.

He's in a white button-up that was white at some point today, now soaked through with red and streaks of what looks like mud. My heart drops straight to my stomach until I confirm that it isn't his blood.

Why did I even worry for a second?

I shake it off and step fully into the room.

"Welcome, my love." He starts working the buttons open one by one. "I'm not thrilled that the first time you walk into my home willingly, this is the state you find me in."

I look away to steady myself while he keeps undressing, having mostly given up the fight against the physical pull he has on me—I gave in to that particular war a while ago, on my own terms.

But being in the same room as him half-undressed and expected to have a serious conversation feels impossible.

I'm attracted to him, and it makes it harder to focus when he's like this.

His hands move to his belt next.

"Stop."

He tilts his head, brow arching. I haven't told him no in that regard in longer than I can remember.

"Why?"

"I came here to talk."

He leans back into the chair, shirtless, blood still drying along one collarbone, pants half-undone, arms slung wide over the back of the seat.

"Talk, then, my love. You have my full attention."

I plant my feet. "I want to dance. Professionally. For real."

He doesn't even pause to consider it. "No."

"I'll marry you without a single fight. No more games, no more running. Just let me keep this one thing for myself." I press my palms flat against my thighs. "Please. Let me have something that's still mine."

I already know the wedding's happening regardless. Might as well see if there's anything left to negotiate on my way into it.

He laughs, and there's no humor in it. "Our wedding's already scheduled, my dear fiancée. That part isn't up for discussion, with or without a bargain attached to it."

Well. That didn't move anything.

But I have one more card left to play.

"I could love you." I hold his gaze steady, making sure he sees the truth behind my words. "I think, given time, I might actually grow to love you, Matteo."

Because he isn't unlovable. Despite everything. He's controlling to a fault. Possessive in a way that borders on insanity. He loses his mind with jealousy.

But he's also capable of being careful with me. Affectionate, when he lets himself be. Understanding, in the rare moments he isn't busy deciding my entire life for me.

It wouldn't be hard to love this man, if he'd just stop needing every single thing to go his way.

If he gave me a say, sometimes. Just sometimes.

He studies me for a long stretch of silence.

"You already love me. It's a shame you can't see that yet."

I stomp my foot. "I'm being serious. If you gave me a say in anything—if you dialed back the control—you wouldn't be a hard man to love, Matteo."

He shakes his head slowly. "I would give almost anything to earn your love. But I can't do what you're asking. Even if I somehow tamed the jealousy, I have enemies, Amara. People who would use any opening—a stage, an audience, a public schedule—as a clean shot at both of us. I can't protect you and hand you that kind of exposure in the same breath."

I hate that I understand the logic even while resenting every word of it. He's the reason I became a target in the first place. But it already happened, and it's time to fix. Not to dwell.

"Then let's leave."

"What?"

"Let's leave. All of it. This world, this rot, its darkness." I take a step closer. "Please, Matteo."

"Amara. You know I can't do that."

"Please. Please. I could dance then. You already have more money than you'll spend in ten lifetimes. Hand the legacy and the ports to Lorenzo." I'm not above begging at this point. "We wouldn't have to wake up to gunfire ever again. Just us. You'd get exactly what you've always wanted. Me. And I'd finally get what I've wanted my whole life. How could I not adore a man who gave up everything just for my love?"

I already concluded that there's no me without him. He left no other choice. He is my fate. My destiny—whether I like it or not. But maybe I can have a bit of control on how our story pans out.

Control over my own life. For once since my existence.

He looks at me for a long moment, cataloguing my face, my breathing, whatever tells I'm not aware I'm giving off.

"You know I can't do that either. It's too dangerous." His voice drops. "The only exit from this life is a bullet to the head, my love. You know that. I'm sorry."

I sink down onto my knees in front of him.

"Please." One last time, because I don't know what else is left to try.

He's out of the chair and on the floor with me in seconds.

"You do not kneel in front of me. Ever." He hisses, almost wounded. "I'm the devil who marvels at you. Who begs for you. Who worships every version of you that's ever existed. You do not bend down to me."

"Please," I try again.

"I'm sorry, my love. It's impossible." His thumb brushes along my jaw, unbearably gentle. "But I promise you, on everything I am—none of it will

ever touch you."

"And if it touches you instead?" I whisper something I haven't realized I've been scared of till now.

"Even in death," he vows, "I would never leave you to fend for yourself."

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Chapter Thirty-Four

Amara

Hate festers.

It festers, and festers, and keeps festering until there's nothing underneath it left that resembles anything else but rot.

Everything's gone up in flames. Father seems to be going insane. And the last plan I had—begging Matteo, offering him my heart, my body, whatever he wants—bought me nothing.

I'm bound to this darkness permanently now. Some nights I catch my reflection dressed up for another one of these events, hair done, makeup flawless, and if I look too long, I swear I catch patches of something greyish under the surface. Like whatever's rotting inside me has finally started showing through the skin.

I finish my makeup and just stare at the mirror for a long time.

At a broken woman.

At a stupid woman who never figured out how to manipulate a man this obsessed with her into giving her what she wants.

I hit the mirror once, and it doesn't shatter the way it always does in movies. It just hurts my hand.

"Fuck," I scream.

I spin slowly, scanning the walls, wondering exactly which one of them is feeding this back to him somewhere.

One of the only times I've ever asked him for something—and he turned me away.

I need out of this house. I'm losing whatever's left of my mind in here.

Walking down, I find my father on the couch—the one piece of furniture the debt collectors apparently deemed too worthless to pawn. He's staring at the wall.

I stop to the side and watch him for a second. I barely speak to him these days, and something about him right now scares me.

He mutters something under his breath, low, repetitive, words I can't quite catch, and then he starts rocking.

"Father?"

The muttering gets louder.

My breath catches hard in my chest. "Snap out of it. Please."

This looks like something out of a horror film, and my hands are shaking when I nudge his shoulder. That breaks whatever loop he was stuck in, and he flinches away from my touch violently before his eyes finally land on mine and clear.

"Oh. My little girl."

For one strange, unwelcome second, I catch a glimpse of the man he used to be, before he became whatever it is he is now. He wasn't always like this.

I refuse to let this moment mean anything, though. Because he might be back to himself, briefly, but I'm never getting back to whoever I used to be. That part of me is gone the same way Lydia is gone.

I look down at my own hands. They're mine, but the way they move doesn't feel like mine anymore. I look in the mirror sometimes and even my own eyes don't look like mine.

I can't find my way back to whoever I was before it happened.

"Get some sleep. You look exhausted." I keep my eyes anywhere but his. "I'm heading out."

Because right now, for these few minutes, it's actually him—the man I knew for most of my life, before any of this. And I know it won't last past tonight. I can't survive saying goodbye twice.

As I turn to leave, his hand closes around my wrist. "I'm going to fix this. I promise you."

"There's nothing left to fix." I pull my arm free. "That train left a long time ago, Father."

He calls after me as I walk out, promising he'll make it up to me no matter what it costs him.

Lies.

The drive to the venue passes in a blur, and the second I'm inside, I find Mia and drop into the seat beside her.

"Hi!" She beams at me, genuinely happy to see me, the way she always is.

"Hey." My voice comes out hollow.

Because the hate's spread past just Matteo, past just myself. It's found its way into every corner, including people I actually love.

I hate her a little tonight, and I hate myself more for hating her. I hate that she has the family and the love I've spent my whole life reaching for. I hate that she wasn't even born into this world and somehow adapted to it with more grace than I've managed to.

I feel emptied out completely. Just a container for whatever's left of the hate, and even the people I love the most aren't exempt from it anymore.

"You feeling okay?" she asks, studying my face.

I should feel guilty about how short I'm about to be with her. I don't have the energy for guilt tonight.

"No, Mia."

"Want to talk about it?" She hands me a glass of wine, and I finish it in one swallow.

"Not. At. All."

She nods, unbothered.

I brace for her to give up on me, to find an excuse to sit somewhere else for the night. Instead, she stays. She fills the silence with stories about Daisy and Nino and some ridiculous argument they had about paint colors for the nursery, even though I give her absolutely nothing back. She never once stops trying, even when there's clearly nothing here to try with.

She's a good friend. Better than I deserve.

I twist the wedding ring around my finger, catching sight of Matteo out of the corner of my eye. A small crowd's already formed around him—women included, all vying for two seconds of his attention. He gives none of them the time of day.

Only me. Always only me.

And yet he never loved me enough to actually give me the one thing I begged him for on my knees.

If he really loved me the way he claims to, maybe these three years wouldn't have been for nothing. Maybe when I came to him pleading, offering everything I had left to offer in exchange for the one fucking thing I've always wanted, he would have found a way to say yes.

He said no.

Which means he doesn't love me.

Which means three years amounts to nothing more than an expensive, violent fixation.

And the worst part is that I'm terrified of anything happening to him. Because somewhere along the way, I started associating him with the only

pleasure I still have access to. Safety. Attention. A kind of affection that, however twisted, still shows up every single day without fail.

But none of the awful things he's done have faded from memory just because my body's started responding to him. I still remember every opportunity he sabotaged. Every single thing he controlled without consideration to me. Every piece of myself he's stripped away because it wasn't stamped with his name first.

I don't know how to feel most days. Tonight, I know exactly how I feel, though.

Rage.

I want to hurt him the way he hurt me, kneeling on his floor, offering him everything I had left, and watching him say no anyway.

His eyes find mine across the room, drinking me in.

I raise my champagne glass in a poisonous mock toast, smirk stretched so tight it stings my own mouth, and drink the whole thing in one go without breaking eye contact.

Mia shifts uncomfortably beside me. "Amara. I can see it—whatever devil is behind your eyes right now, I see it. Please, just think for a second. We can leave. Go get ice cream, sit in my car and talk, anything. Don't do something tonight you're going to regret tomorrow."

I'm exhausted of people telling me what I should and shouldn't do with my own life.

"I can handle myself." I stand, already scanning the room for the first available man willing to dance with me. And they're not many considering I'm the devil's soon-to-be wife.

I find a man near the edge of the floor—one who is notorious for always wanting to stir trouble and break the rules. I offer him my hand, and he stares at it for a second.

Anxiety starts to pool in my stomach, but then he looks up at me with a small smile and mutters, "Bored of the fiancé? Shame."

He takes my hand, thumb rubbing over the diamond ring that I have not taken off since Matteo last forced it on my hand.

Pulling me in, we sway to the music. The man seems to be buzzing with excitement… and why not? He's getting a "one up" over the most powerful man in the city, even though he's nothing in rank.

Ego will be his downfall. My stubbornness will be mine.

Through all of it, I never once take the ring off my finger.

Just like he never stops telling me he loves me, even while he keeps hurting me.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

Matteo

The crowd parts for me like something out of scripture, hell's own version of it.

One man collides with another trying to clear my path fast enough, and they both go down.

I'm aware, distantly, of whatever's sitting behind my eyes. My beautiful fiancée wanted to understand exactly why her future husband gets called the devil in rooms he isn't standing in?

Be my guest, my love. Watch closely.

Every step I take feels like it should be leaving scorch marks on the marble.

She's dancing with him. Smiling. His hands never wander below her waist, but he says something that makes her laugh.

That laugh belongs to me.

That smile belongs to me.

Why doesn't she ever look at me like that? Dance with me like that? Give me one honest chance?

Am I really this unlovable?

By the time I reach them, my hand's already closed around his throat.

Amara gasps, stumbling backward, but she doesn't move to stop it. She just watches. She already knows there's nothing to be done once this starts.

The entire room's watching now, too.

I lift him clean off the floor, legs kicking uselessly, spinning him.

"S-she came to me," he chokes out, then screams as I slam him down onto the marble. "Fuck—ouch—she came onto me first, man, maybe control your own woman before—"

My boot connects with his jaw before he finishes the sentence, and I see something small skitter across the floor. A tooth. I plant my foot on his face.

In hindsight, he's about to become a useful lesson for anyone in this room who somehow didn't already understand—even if my fiancée throws herself directly at you, you run the opposite direction as fast as your legs allow.

He's new to this world, clearly. Arrogant enough to think stubbornness earns respect instead of a body bag. I don't recognize which syndicate sent him, though by tomorrow morning none of them will claim him either.

"I didn't mean—"

I press down harder, watching his face create ugly folds under the pressure.

His hands claw upward in desperation, finding my left hand, digging in. White light sparks behind my eyes, pain rocketing from my palm straight up to my shoulder, into my skull. I clench my jaw and give him absolutely nothing back.

"Stop!" Amara screams, hand flying up over her mouth immediately after.

Stop what, exactly? Stop killing him? Or for him to stop squeezing the one place on my body that actually hurts?

I don't get the chance to search her face for the answer, because Mia's already at her side, pulling her toward the far corner of the room, turning her body away.

He touched what belongs to me. Has belonged to me since before either of us existed, since whatever built this universe built her with my name already carved into her skin.

For me. Only ever for me.

It's borderline blasphemous that she'd even let another man's hands on her. There is no version of her past, present, or future that includes anyone but me, and I intend to make that obvious to this entire room tonight.

I clench my jaw harder as his grip on my hand tightens with whatever's left of his strength—the body's last desperate reflex before it stops fighting. The pain will end soon. His will end sooner.

My boot comes down harder. His breath starts catching, his eyes going wide as something in his face gives way with an audible crack. His hold on my hand finally slackens.

The pain in my hand doesn't slacken with it. I keep my expression flat regardless.

His skin turns a shade of blue. Another crack sounds, his jaw dislocating, his whole face collapsing lopsided. His legs stop kicking.

Only then do I lift my foot, delivering two more kicks for good measure before I straighten my jacket and turn back to the room.

Every single guest suddenly finds something fascinating to discuss with each other, averting their eyes from me. Bodies aren't unusual at these events. Someone will have this cleaned soon.

I walk toward Amara. She shakes her head at me.

I glare back, unmoved.

When I'm close enough to close my hand around her arm, Mia pulls her tighter into her side.

"Let's give her a minute, okay?" Mia mumbles. "And you need to take a breather before—"

"Mia," I hiss. "Give. Me. My. Fiancée."

Her expression is one of conflict—she understands this world's rules.

Amara finally speaks. "It's fine, Mia."

She stands on her own, and I take her the rest of the way myself, hand wrapped around her wrist, pulling her down the hallway to the nearest empty bedroom. I shove her inside and turn the lock behind us.

"What is wrong with you?" she screams the second the door clicks shut.

I love this woman with everything I have.

I would hand her my bank accounts. Every port I control. The literal leash I hold every man in my organization with.

And she still treats stray dogs on her evening walks with more warmth than she's ever shown me.

Her entire purpose in life seems to be trying to humiliate me. Defy me.

She has no idea I'll take her in any way I can get her. Even like this.

"Why would you do that?" I crowd her back against the wall.

"Didn't like the show?" She tilts her chin up, mock-pouting at me. "Oh, poor you."

"No. Other. Men," I bite out.

She cocks her head. "Why should I listen to a single thing you say, when you never once listen to me?"

I curse under my breath. This is about what she asked me the other day and I didn’t give her.

I didn't refuse her because I wanted to watch her suffer. This world doesn't offer exits—once you're inside it, there's no way back out, and every person you love becomes a liability. I never cared before, because I didn't love anyone. Now there's her, and my entire existence makes the one thing she wants impossible to give her.

Impossible.

And this isn't only the jealousy talking. Because this shit is a bullet waiting to find her.

I exhale slowly. "My love, let's talk about this. Let me explain—"

"No." She laughs, cutting me off. She jabs a finger into her own chest. "Let ME explain something to you."

"I'm all ears, baby." Every part of me wants to close the distance and kiss the anger straight off her mouth.

"You will never, ever own the docile, lovey-dovey version of me." She nods slowly. "Understand?"

I don't want her docile. I've never once wanted her docile.

I want her. All of her.

"As long as I'm trapped in this world—the one that's been turning me into someone I don't recognize in the mirror anymore—I will not love you." Her voice doesn't waver once. "And I mean that. I will never love you."

Hearing that hurts whatever's left functioning in my chest, same as it always does. And still, if she handed me the same knife and told me to use it on myself, I'd crawl across broken glass to do it if it meant one more minute of her attention.

"Even across a thousand lifetimes," she whispers, "if this is who you come to me as—that answer doesn't change."

"Even across a thousand lifetimes," I answer, "I'd love you exactly the same. No matter how much poison you decide to hand me along the way."

She lays the mock sympathy on thick this time, hand pressed to her own chest. "But I don't love you. Poor Matteo."

I bite the glove off my left hand with my teeth and spit it onto the floor between us.

It's still throbbing from where he clawed at it minutes ago.

"Prove it." I hold the ruined hand out toward her.

"Prove what?"

"You already know the one thing in this world that brings me to my knees besides you. Use it. Prove you don't feel a single thing for me."

Defiance flares bright in her eyes, and she reaches out, wrapping her fingers around my hand.

She squeezes. Barely.

"More." I dare her. "Come on. Show me exactly how much you hate me."

Her nostrils flare, and she squeezes harder this time, though it's still nowhere near what I know she's capable of if she actually meant it.

"I can take it, baby. Hurt me. Bring me to my knees. Prove you don't love me."

We stay locked like that for a long, silent stretch, her hand around mine, both of us daring the other to break first. She squeezes once, hard, for exactly one second. I grimace, and she immediately lets go.

I smirk despite the pain still radiating up my arm.

"What's wrong, baby? Couldn't do it?"

She sinks down onto the edge of the bed, dropping her head into both hands.

She loves me. Whether she's willing to say the words out loud or not, whether she even lets herself believe it—she loves me.

I crouch down in front of her until we're level, face to face.

"I love you, too," I whisper.

"You're delusional." It comes out muffled through her hands.

I ignore her. "And don't forget, baby—I went easy tonight. If I ever catch you looking at another man again, you will not enjoy finding out exactly how far past this I'm capable of going."

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Chapter Thirty-Six

Amara

Paint splatters across my old t-shirt as the girls and I help Amy redo the color of the main wall.

She's practically vibrating with excitement over this place, and so am I. There's enough space here that we don't collide mid-spin anymore, and we don't have to take turns.

From the outside, my life probably looks like a dream. A beautiful community of women who've become family. Good friends. A billionaire fiancé who could buy this entire block if he felt like it.

But anyone who actually looks past the surface would see the truth fast enough. I'm not me anymore.

I danced with that man yesterday knowing exactly what it would cost him. It cost him his life. I didn't feel a single flicker of guilt about it.

There was a version of me, not that long ago, who felt guilty over things that weren't even her fault—just for existing near them, just for surviving them. Now I actively provoke the worst outcome.

I've felt nothing for a long time now. Numb.

And I think somewhere deep down I understand what it means. It means there's no way back to whoever I used to be.

"Amara, you doing okay?" one of the younger girls asks, and I turn with a small smile, setting the paint roller down.

"Yeah. I'm good."

"It's just—" She winces before finishing the sentence. "You look really tired lately."

What a sweet way of telling someone they look like gum scraped off the bottom of a shoe.

"Haven't been sleeping great. I'll feel more like myself once my schedule settles down." I dip the roller again and go back to the wall.

"Okay," she says, unconvinced, and I blow her a kiss to end the conversation.

A flash of memory surfaces uninvited—how he dared me to prove I felt nothing by hurting him, and me somehow, infuriatingly, unable to actually do it.

Why couldn't I do it?

I shove the thought down hard and focus on the paint instead, wanting nothing more than to finish this wall so we can finally start using the space.

My phone rings. I have to carefully lower the roller without dripping onto the floor or the secondhand couch we hauled in last week, and by the time I manage it, the call's already gone to voicemail.

It rings again immediately.

I excuse myself and step outside, answering the unknown number with my brows already furrowed.

"Hello?"

"Amara. It's me."

I run through the catalog of voices I know, and it takes almost a full minute before I place it. Lorenzo. By the time I've caught up, he's already mid-sentence.

"—not doing well at all, and he's refusing anyone near him. You're the only—"

"Wait. Say that again, please." The words come out on an exhale, my chest tightening.

Lorenzo curses under his breath, then continues through what sounds like gritted teeth. "Matteo isn't doing well. Fever, weak, barely functional. He's locked himself in his room and won't let anyone in. He won't refuse you."

Something twists uncomfortably in my chest. Probably just the wine from last night sitting wrong. Acid reflux, maybe. I feel nauseous.

I open and close my mouth several times before finally managing, "What exactly does that have to do with me?"

Meanwhile, I'm already pulling up a ride app on my phone, scrolling for the nearest available car.

"Amara. Put the pride down for one minute. He won't let a single other person in that room take care of him. Just you."

I swallow, tapping to confirm the ride.

"I don't think that's actually true."

Lorenzo growls. "Please."

Something tells me this is one of maybe five times in his life he's said that word.

"I'm on my way."

The car shows up five minutes later, and the entire ride I run through what I'm even supposed to do once I get there. The acid reflux, or whatever it is, only gets worse the closer we get.

The second I arrive, the gates swing open before the car's even come to a full stop. Lorenzo's already waiting at the front door.

"Is he any better?" I ask before bothering with hello.

"No." His jaw's tight, worry written across his face.

He walks me straight to the bedroom and knocks.

"Lorenzo, fuck off," comes a rough croak from the other side.

"Amara's here to see you."

I twist my fingers together, nervous despite every reason I have to not care right now.

Silence stretches for several long seconds before a quieter voice finally answers. "*My* Amara?"

Lorenzo presses two fingers to the bridge of his nose. "Yes, brother. *Your* Amara."

He glances at me sideways, something almost like a glare there. I don't fully understand what that's about. He nods toward the door, and I push it open slowly, stepping inside.

Matteo's laid out across the bed in nothing but boxers, sweat soaking through the sheets beneath him. It's one of the rare times I've seen his left hand bare—no glove—and it's trembling worse than I've ever seen it.

I press the back of my hand to his forehead. He's burning up.

He catches my hand with his good one, drags it to his mouth, and presses a kiss against my knuckles.

"You care about me," he says, half a smirk somehow surviving the fever.

"Can you stand?" I ask, ignoring that entirely.

"For you, baby?" A cough interrupts him. "I'd do absolutely anything."

I roll my eyes. We both know that isn't true, but I don't have the energy to argue with a delirious man right now.

I help him up, though I'm not sure how much actual support I'm providing versus just standing nearby while he wills his own legs to

cooperate. He wobbles into the shower stall, and I grab the handheld showerhead, adjusting the temperature slightly cooler than neutral before running it down his chest.

He flinches hard. "Cold, baby."

"I know. I'm sorry. Just hold on a minute, okay?"

He nods, and I keep the water moving over him slowly, watching him shiver the entire time, trying very hard not to notice the way his soaked boxers cling to him.

After about ten minutes, once he's too weak to keep standing on his own, I towel him dry as best I can and walk him back to the bed, where he collapses the second his knees hit the mattress.

I find a bottle of ibuprofen on the nightstand, shake out two, and set them on his tongue before helping him wash them down with water.

Probably the flu. He needs rest.

His left hand keeps trembling against the sheets, and there is nothing in this world that could stop me from taking it into both of mine, working slow, careful circles into the scarred knuckles.

"Ahh, baby." It comes out almost like a moan.

I dig in gently, taking my time.

"Why are your eyes so green?" he mutters, gaze unfocused.

Is he delirious right now?

I keep my focus on his hand instead of answering.

"Look at me." His voice drops, softer, almost pleading. "If you can't give me your heart, at least give me your eyes for a minute."

I drag my gaze up to meet his, and he sighs.

"You're so beautiful," he mumbles.

"Thank you," I say, unsure what else there is to say to that.

"Feels like I'm dying," he whispers.

"What? Why would you say that?" I'm on my feet immediately, hand back on his forehead, though the fever's come down since the shower.

"Relax, baby. It's just a virus." A weak, teasing edge creeps into his voice despite everything.

"Don't say that to me again," I hiss.

"Dying?" he asks.

I don't answer, because the answer's obvious.

"Would you like to know what my last wish would be, if it came to that?"

"What?"

"For you to kiss me."

I let go of his hand and take a step back.

"To kiss me while actually looking at me. Not pushing me away, not pretending there's nothing on your end of this. To kiss me knowing exactly who's kissing you back—the man who's obsessed with you, who belongs to you completely, who will never once get tired of chasing you down." He says.

"Matteo—"

"Please," he begs.

"Please what?"

"Please. Kiss me."

He looks so exhausted lying there, fever-flushed and sick. Maybe that's exactly why I do it.

I lean down and press my mouth to his, still warm from the fever underneath.

His tongue slips past my lips, slow, and we stay like that longer than I mean to let it go.

It's wrong how right it feels.

Like coming home.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Amara

Matteo is waiting for me outside the house with a bouquet so large it looks ridiculous. I can see him through the window, checking his phone.

A text lights up my screen. *Come down. I have a surprise.*

I bite my lip, weighing it.

This is probably a bad idea. It'll give him hope that doesn't actually exist between us. As long as we're both trapped in this world, as long as I keep losing pieces of whatever innocence I had left, I genuinely don't know if I can love at all anymore.

I'm not sure, I type back.

Come on. I'll make it worth your while ;)

Well. It's only a few hours.

Maybe—and I know how stupid this hope is even as I have it—maybe tonight he'll tell me he's found a way out.

I get dressed fast and hurry down the stairs. My father stops me at the front door before I can reach the handle.

"Matteo paid off the debts again." His voice is quiet, almost ashamed.

"I know." I sigh. Of course he did. Our wedding date's already locked in. That's the whole arrangement.

"Why?" he asks.

"Are you seriously asking me that?" I flash him the ring on my finger with a look I hope conveys exactly how tired I am of this conversation.

"So he's still determined to have you." He says it almost to himself.

I shake my head. There's nothing useful left in this conversation, and no way can my father fix anything at this point.

"Goodbye, Father. Try not to put us back in debt again by next week."

His face flushes red. "I'm going to fix this. I mean it this time."

I don't bother answering. I just leave, walking down toward Matteo, who straightens the second he sees me.

"Hi," I say. "You look like you're feeling better."

"Thanks to you, baby." He hands me the bouquet, and it's so absurdly oversized I nearly lose my balance holding it. He takes it back immediately, laying it across the backseat before opening my door.

I climb in, watching him round the hood to the driver's side.

"Where are we going?" I ask once he's settled behind the wheel.

"Surprise. Check the bags in the back."

I twist around and pull one of the bags into my lap, sorting through tissue paper to find stage costumes and a fresh pair of pointe shoes still stiff enough to need breaking in.

The best money can buy. Obviously.

"Is this some kind of joke?" I hiss. "Because if it is, it's cruel, Matteo. Very cruel, showing me this when you know exactly why I can't dance for an audience ever again."

He glances at me sideways, almost offended. "I would never do that to you."

"Then where are we going?"

"Patience, my love."

An hour later, we pull up outside a building I don't recognize—worn brick, dark windows, it looks abandoned. My nerves start climbing.

"Come on, baby." He's already at my door.

He leads me toward the entrance, and I won't pretend my heart isn't racing. What exactly is waiting behind that door?

"You're not planning to murder me, right?" I half-joke.

"No, no." He wiggles his eyebrows, absurdly. "I still very much need you around."

Inside, it doesn't smell like rot the way I braced for. It smells like fresh floor polish and new paint.

He flips on the lights.

"SURPRISE!"

The shout comes from everywhere at once, and it takes me three seconds to process what I'm looking at.

Mia's there, Nino standing stiff and awkward beside her with Daisy on his hip, clearly bribed into attendance. Lorenzo's leaning against the far wall in an actual suit instead of his usual all-black, arms crossed, almost smiling. A cluster of men I recognize as Matteo's—some of the same faces who've

circled my life for years—stand near a folding table loaded with food. And there, front and center, practically vibrating—

Amy. And every single girl from the studio, all of them dressed up and grinning at me. I'm about to burst into tears.

In the center of the room, there's a huge stage with lighting rigged into the ceiling directly over it. Curtains hang on either side, a few rows of folding chairs arranged in front of it like a real audience.

"You wanted to perform," Matteo tells me. "This is all what I can actually give you. It's not everything. I know it's not everything you wanted." A pause, something vulnerable crossing his face. "But it's what I can give you safely. I'm trying my best, baby. I am. I can even control my jealousy over this, for you. Everyone in this room, I trust. No one who could ever hurt you."

My eyes are stinging, and I'm blinking back tears.

It's a fraction of what I actually wanted—no professional contract, no real audience beyond the people already tangled up in my life, no stage that leads anywhere bigger than tonight. But it's better than nothing. Nobody's going to shut it down halfway through, and nobody's walking out of here in a body bag because they looked at me too long.

I go up on my toes, both hands fisting in the front of his shirt, kissing him right there.

I don't know why… maybe I'm just too tired to fight anymore. Maybe I feel like rewarding him for doing things I like, even if they are out of his comfort zone, so he can do them more.

"Thank you," I say against his mouth, recognizing that he's trying.

He looks dazed pulling back; I think he wasn't prepared for that reaction after months of me not letting him kiss me.

"Anytime, baby," he says, and I catch Lorenzo across the room, one eyebrow raised.

I don't understand that man.

I turn to greet everyone properly, and the girls from the studio descend on me instantly.

"Oh my God, Amara, he did all this?" one of them practically shrieks.

"You are so lucky," another sighs, glancing over my shoulder at Matteo like he's hung the moon. "God, the way he looks at you—"

He kills people and trades weapons and drugs for a living, Amanda. Not everything is as perfect as it seems.

Of course, I don't say that out loud.

"He built a theater," Amy's eyes are glassy. "For one night. For you."

"I know. I know," I mutter, rubbing the back of my neck.

Mia catches my eye from across the room and mouths, *Are you okay?* I give her a small nod, and she seems to accept it, though I catch her watching Matteo closely.

I change into the first costume in a small back room someone's rigged up as a dressing area, and when I step back out, Amy's waiting to help pin my hair.

"You ready?" she whispers, squeezing my hand.

"I think so." And for the first time in longer than I can remember, I feel something other than numbness. I'm excited.

The music starts, and it's not even a recording; it's live, a single violinist tucked into the corner I missed on the way in—and I move into the first position without letting myself think too hard. I'm doing this without a choreography.

I dance for my audience, even though not all of them are for me. Most came to do Matteo a favor. But it's still an audience.

I hear Mia clap at every turn, and it makes me smile. I see Amy mouthing the counts along with me from the side. The men along the back wall watch with an odd kind of reverence, yet still respectful because their lives depend on Matteo not even suspecting they're interested in more than the routine.

And I know it's hard for Matteo… but he's giving me this.

And he looks entranced by every single thing I do on that stage.

I let myself believe I might actually be finding my way somewhere. That maybe me and Matteo can figure things out.

God, I missed this so much.

The stage.

The audience.

The creativity.

It feels good.

I finish the routine to applause. Matteo claps the loudest.

I let myself have this… the hope.

But nothing good ever seems to last very long in my life...

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

Amara

My wedding day is in three days.

It feels surreal. I'm marrying the most dangerous man in this city. A man so obsessed with me he'd stop at absolutely nothing to have me, and has already proven it more times than I can count.

In hindsight, Matteo got exactly what he wanted. My bitter defiance—all of it eventually derailed.

He won. I lost.

But God, I put up the best fight I had in me.

Am I happy? I don't know how to answer that question anymore. He's trying, in his own broken, controlling way. That doesn't erase the fact that he took my entire life and is now handing pieces of it back to me like scraps.

I twirl once in front of the mirror in my wedding dress—bought, altered, and perfected in a single day, because apparently even seamstresses work overtime when the bride belongs to the devil.

Looking at my own eyes in the reflection, they still belong to a different woman than the one who used to live behind them. I am a different woman now. That happy, innocent girl with an unshakable moral compass doesn't exist anymore, and she's not coming back no matter what.

It will always be the single biggest loss of my life. Bigger, in some ways, than anything else this world's taken from me.

A knock sounds at the door. There's only one person it could be.

"Come in," I mutter, stepping out of my heels.

My father walks in, and his whole face goes slack the second he sees me in the dress. His eyes well up almost immediately.

More of who he used to be seems to be surfacing lately, flickering in and out—moments of clarity followed by something that looks almost like insanity, back and forth, unpredictable.

"You look beautiful, little girl."

I turn my back to him, pretending to busy myself reorganizing perfume bottles on the vanity. "Thank you, Father."

"I really am sorry. For everything."

I nod, swallowing hard around the lump forming in my throat. Telling him I forgive him would be a lie, and I don't have it in me to lie to him right now. But I also don't believe in kicking a man who's already on the ground, even if he's the one who dug the hole himself.

"I know most of this is on me." His voice cracks slightly. "I didn't protect you from him. I let his money reel me in, his power, the fact that I could sit at any table I wanted with zero consequences hanging over me. Some part of me always knew, deep down, that eventually he'd ask for you as payment. And I let it happen anyway. There isn't a single thing I could say that makes any of that better."

My arms cross over my chest on instinct, holding myself together so I don't do something stupid like cross the room and hug him. Because that's my father standing there right now—the version of him that's barely made an appearance in years, buried under whatever demon's had a grip on him. It breaks something in me that it took hitting rock bottom for him to finally show back up.

"Why," I ask, unable to hold the question in any longer. "Why now, Father? After everything. Why now?"

He steps closer, but no matter how close he gets, there will always be an ice-wall between us.

"You told me you wished it had been me. At Lydia's funeral," he whispers.

I bite down on my lip, feeling something I haven't felt in longer than I can remember creeping up my throat: guilt.

"I was—I was in so much pain that day, Father, I didn't—" My words cut off, because I know I meant every single word of it in that moment.

His eyes soften, and he laughs, but it's a broken, painful sound.

"Don't worry, little girl. That's exactly what you're going to get."

My heart drops straight through the floor. "What does that mean? No. No. NO. Please tell me you haven't done something stupid."

He shakes his head slowly. "It's not stupid. It might be the single right thing I've ever done in my whole life, aside from having you."

I lunge forward and grab his shirt with both fists. "Tell me. Tell me exactly what you're planning."

My eyes fill despite everything I do to stop it. If my father takes his own life because of something I said in grief, I don't think I will survive that. Our relationship's been a wreck for years, but that doesn't mean I can handle him pinning this on me.

He's crying openly now. "I'm giving you your freedom back, little girl. I did what needed doing. You'll remember me fondly one day, instead of with all this hate sitting behind your eyes right now. I finally made the sacrifice I should have made years ago."

I sink onto the edge of the bed, breath coming faster and faster, the heavy layers of the dress crushing in against my ribs. I press my palm flat against my chest, trying to slow my racing heart down.

"Please," I beg. "Tell me what you mean."

He gives me a small smile. "Matteo and I won't be around to make your life hell anymore, little girl. After today, we'll both be somewhere far away from you. You'll grieve for a while. A few days, maybe longer. But eventually you'll thank me. You'll thank me the day you finally get to dance the way you want. The day you walk down a street and don't feel eyes on the back of your neck. The day you never have to worry, ever again, about your own father putting you up as collateral on a card table—"

The next part appears to cost him everything he has left to say out loud.

"Because you were right, little girl. In my desperation, I would have put you up as the prize eventually. I can't stop. I've proven that to both of us more times than I can count. So it's better this way. Better that I leave before I do it again."

"Leave where?" I scream, searching his face for an answer.

"To hell," he spits. "And I'm dragging Matteo Russo down there with me."

"Oh God. Oh God." The room tilts sideways, everything spinning at once. "What did you do? Father, what did you do?"

"Everything for you." He says it exactly the way Matteo's said it to me a hundred times.

"Father, I am begging you. Tell me what you did."

He sits down on the bed beside me, close enough that our knees touch.

"I told Matteo the one thing I knew would make him stop thinking rationally entirely," he says. "I told him you were on your way to the old warehouse district to meet Adrien one last time. And I told Adrien someone

urgently needed to speak with him there. You. They're both already on their way. They'll be there within minutes."

My stomach cramps so violently I curl forward, arms wrapped around myself, sweat breaking out along my hairline.

"And?" The word tears out of me through the pain.

"I planted two timed explosives. One in the east stairwell, one near the loading dock." He says it almost conversationally. "Funny, isn't it? A man as powerful as Matteo Russo, dying because of something that cost less than a hundred dollars to build."

I look up at the ceiling and let out a scream.

"No. No, we need to stop this. Right now. We have to call someone, we have to—"

Getting up from the bed, I stagger against the weight of the dress, catching myself on the vanity. "And what exactly did you think would happen to you, Father, after this? That you'd just walk away?"

He shrugs. "I'll kill myself before they catch up to me. Or they'll get to me first and do it for me. I'd honestly prefer the first option. Less painful, probably."

I try to stand, trip over the hem of the dress, and end up on the floor, forcing air in through my nose and out through my mouth, trying to keep the panic from swallowing me whole.

Looking up at him from the ground, I scream the only thing left in me. "And what happens to me? What happens to me after this, Father? You leave me alone. You take everyone."

He crouches down and kisses my cheek.

"Good." His voice is soft, almost peaceful. "None of us were particularly good company for you anyway, little girl."

He stands, straightens his jacket, and walks toward the door.

"Father!" I scream after him.

Matteo is racing to the place of his death.

My Matteo.

I need to stop this.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

Amara

Storming down the stairs, I grab my father by the back of his shirt.

"Take me there. Now."

He shakes his head, refusing to turn around.

"I'm sorry, little girl. I can't do that."

"Don't you dare do this to me!" I shake him by the collar, my voice cracking on every word. "Take me there. Right now, Father, I mean it."

"I don't think that's a good idea." He won't meet my eyes.

"Take me to Matteo!" I scream it straight into his face. "Take me to him, I swear to God—"

I hit him square in the chest, once, then again.

"TAKE ME TO MATTEO."

"My God." He steps back, eyes going wide, studying my face like he's seeing something there for the first time. "You love him. You actually love him, don't you, girl?"

I shove him back with both hands. "Why does that matter? Take. Me. To. Him. Stop this, please, just stop it before it's too late—"

"Good God." His face drains of what little color it had left. "You really do love him."

"No." My knees give out entirely, and I go down hard onto the marble. "Yes. No. I don't—I don't know anymore, I just need you to stop this, please, Father, please—"

I wrap both arms around his legs, sobbing into the fabric of his pants like I'm eight years old again. "Please. Please. Please. Stop this. Take me there. I'm begging you."

He crouches down and strokes my hair, staring up at the ceiling. "I'll take you. But it's already too late, little girl. Trust me on this. A person can't love the man who caged her. Whatever you think you're feeling isn't love. Give it time after tonight. You'll thank me eventually."

I don't hear anything past *I'll take you*. I'm already up, half-tripping on my dress, hauling myself into the car parked out front.

He gets in, starts the engine, and we tear onto the highway. Every second feels like it's being stolen.

I call Matteo. No answer.

I call again. Straight to voicemail.

Again. Nothing.

With hands shaking too hard to properly hold the phone, I try Lorenzo instead. His line's dead, too—off, disconnected, or somewhere without signal.

"No. No, faster, Father, please, FASTER!" I scream it loud enough that my throat almost rips out, and he presses the pedal down harder, the car lurching forward.

I have no choice left but voicemails.

"Please, Matteo. I'm begging you, pick up. Just pick up the phone."

Nothing.

I call again.

"Matteo, our wedding's in three days. Three days. You did everything, you fought for this, and you don't get to just leave like this. Please. Don't go anywhere near that warehouse. Father planted bombs. Please, please, please —"

Again. And again. And again.

My father squeezes my shoulder as the car finally slows. "We're here. But there's nothing left to do, sweetheart. This is for the best. I promise you, one day, this will feel like the best thing that ever—"

"SHUT UP!" I'm sobbing so hard I can barely see straight, and I throw the door open while the car's still rolling, hurling myself out onto the gravel.

My knees split open on impact, my palms tear against the ground, but there's no worse pain than what is happening in my chest. I run, wedding dress tearing at the hem, and my father catches up just long enough to grab my arm and hold me back before I round the corner into the main floor of the warehouse.

Through the gap in a collapsed wall, I see Matteo standing over Adrien, who's writhing on the concrete, blood running down his face. Matteo's whole body is radiating with fury.

All I need is both of them out of this building. Alive. Breathing. Especially him.

My Matteo.

"Matteo!" I scream.

He turns, and for a second his face goes completely blank.

"You came to meet him here?" His voice comes out wrecked, disbelieving. "In your wedding dress? Three days before our wedding, and this is where you—"

"Never." I shake my head hard enough that it hurts. "I swear to you, I swear on everything, that's not—please, you need to get out of this building right now. I'm begging you, Matteo. Please."

I try to run to him and my father's grip tightens around my arm, holding me back.

"Matteo, let's get out of here. Father planted a trap. Please—" I try again, but he cuts me off with a shout of his own.

"Why? WHY was I never enough for you?" he hisses. "You were planning to come here, to him, three days before you married me?"

Jealousy always blindsided him. He stops thinking rationally when it comes to even thinking about me with other men.

"Listen to me, please, just listen—I didn't betray you—there's a bomb in this building, we need to leave now—"

"A bomb?" His brow furrows, confusion flickering across his face.

And then nothing.

Just white noise and pressure, my body slams sideways into something hard.

My ears ring so loud I can't hear my own scream. When I come back to myself, I'm on the far side of the room, debris covering half my body, my father a few feet away, blood running from a cut somewhere above his eyebrow.

Through the ringing and the taste of copper on my tongue, all I can think is that he died believing I betrayed him. That the last thing Matteo Russo ever thought from me is that I'm sneaking behind his back with an ex-lover, and the very last thing I said back wasn't *I love you*.

Why didn't I tell him I love him?

"NO." I curl into myself on the concrete, sobbing so hard I can't breathe. "NO, NO, NO. MATTEO."

The pain sitting in my chest doesn't resemble anything I've ever felt before. Not even for Lydia.

"This is for the best," my father says, dragging himself upright, swaying slightly.

Multiple blacked-out cars make a stop outside, tires skidding on gravel. My father's hand moves fast, pulling the gun from inside his jacket, pressing it against his temple.

I don't have anything left in me to beg with.

My Matteo is gone.

I never knew I loved him this much. My heart is mangled and scarred, and I don't know how I will survive.

And it's because of my own father.

Matteo promised he wouldn't leave me again, and he left me anyway, the same way everyone in my life eventually does.

"Don't miss us too much, little girl," my father says with a small smile. "Think of me fondly. That's all I'm asking. Know that I made mistakes, but I tried to amend them, even with my last breath. I love you, little girl."

He pulls the trigger.

I get sprayed with blood, and he collapses onto the concrete beside me, body twitching once before going completely still.

Copper floods my mouth.

I'm alone now. Completely alone, in a way I've never once been in my entire life.

Matteo's men come pouring through the collapsed entrance, one in the center among them, shouting orders, and I crawl toward the nearest one.

"Help him. Please, help Matteo, please, he's inside there, there was a bomb, please—"

One of them scoops me up, carrying my body away from the wreckage while the rest of the men disappear into the smoke and debris behind us, flashlights cutting through the dust in every direction, someone already shouting for a medic.

"Let me go, let me see him!" I claw at the man's back, kicking, screaming. "Please, let me go to my Matteo—"

But my Matteo is gone, and no amount of screaming into the smoke behind us is capable of bringing him back.

I have so many regrets, but nothing like not putting my pride aside and giving us a chance. Nothing like not telling him I love him.

But it's too late now.

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Thank You

Thank you, beautiful readers, for giving my book a chance. I've worked so hard on this one, and I hope that shows. I was in tears by the ending, and I hope Matteo and Amara captured your heart the same way they captured mine.

This isn't the end of their story, and it isn't the end of mine with you. Thank you for being here for all of it.

— Tati

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More from Tati Hart

The Tattered Wings Series
A Bratva trilogy of standalone dark romance novellas. *Bound Wings* is a short palette-cleanser, with two more novellas in the series coming soon — no fixed release dates yet, but they're on the way.

The Bittersweet Duet
Sweet Surrender, Book Two, picks up right where *Bitter Defiance* leaves off. I'm aiming for a release six weeks to three months from now — I promise I'll finish it as fast as I possibly can.

Coming Soon: Lorenzo's Trilogy
Already in progress. Prepare your tissues — this one's going to hurt. Real bad.

Coming Soon: A Bittersweet Spin-Off Series
Starting with a standalone following Nino and Mia. I hope you'll stick with me for it — I plan to release it as soon as I possibly can.

I'll see you again soon.

— Tati

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